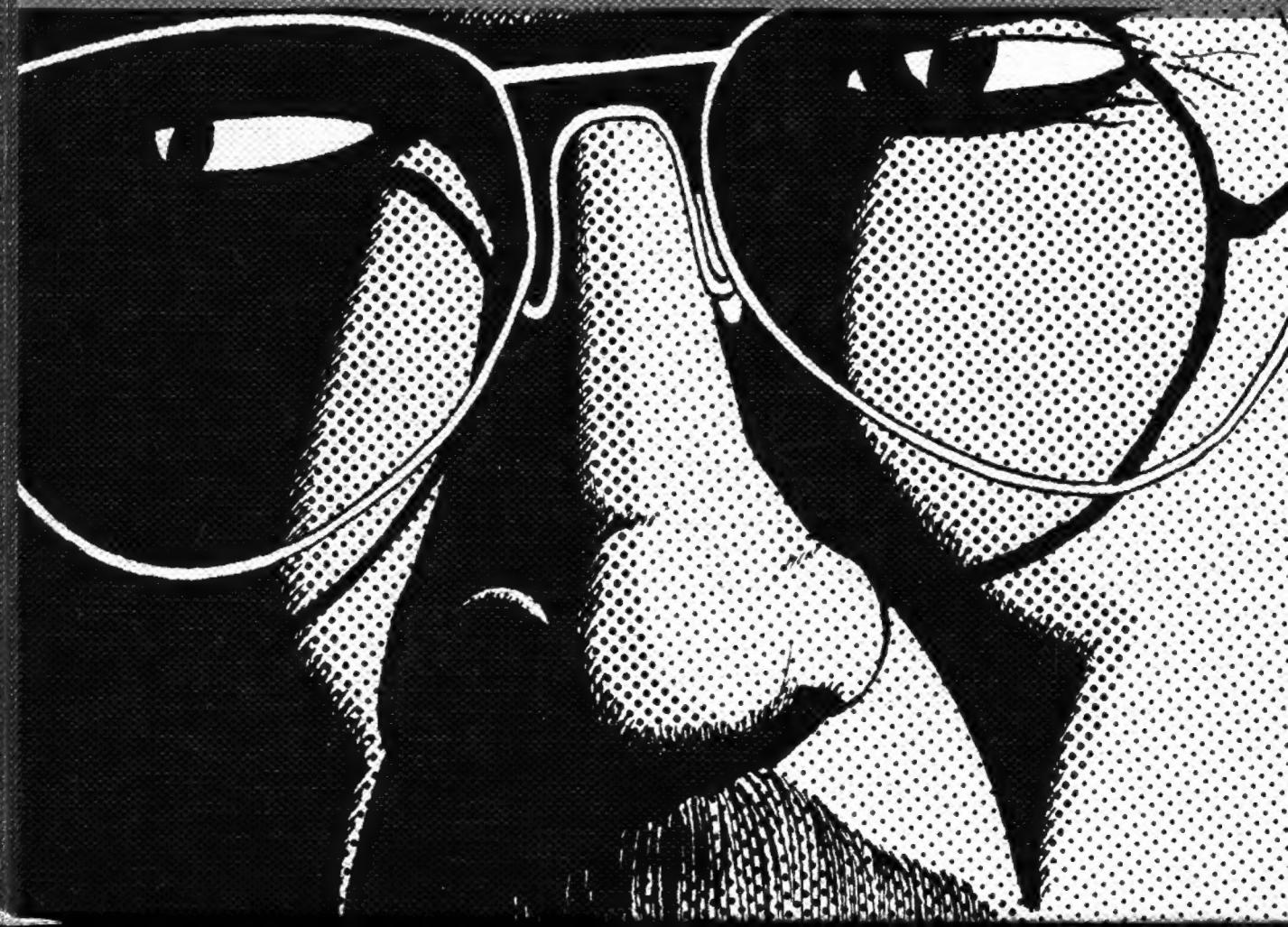


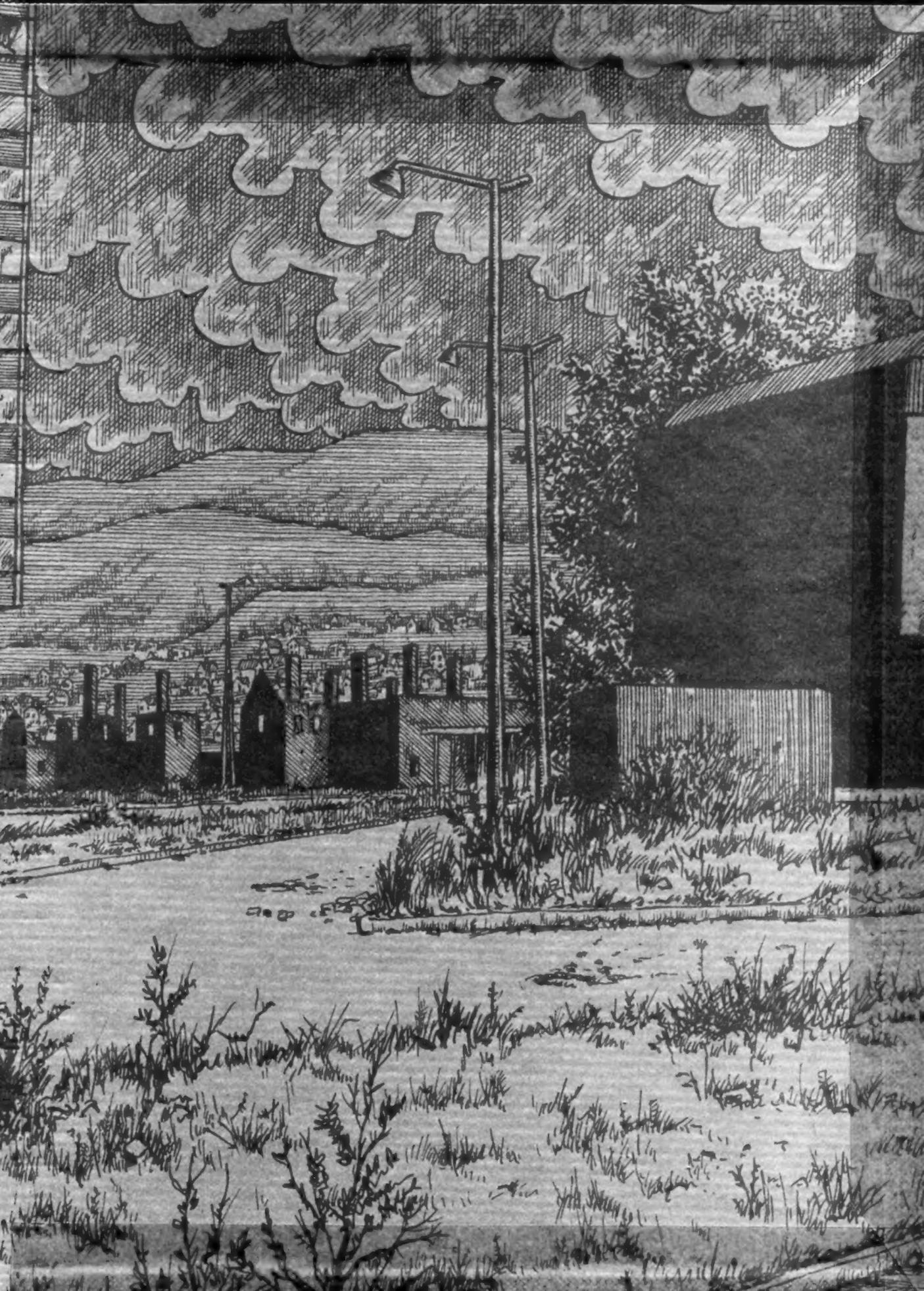
FROM THE AUTHOR OF PALESTINE  
**JOE SACCO**

# **THE FIXER**

A STORY FROM SARAJEVO







# THE FIXER

A STORY FROM SARAJEVO

BY JOE SACCO



DRAWN AND QUARTERLY PUBLICATIONS

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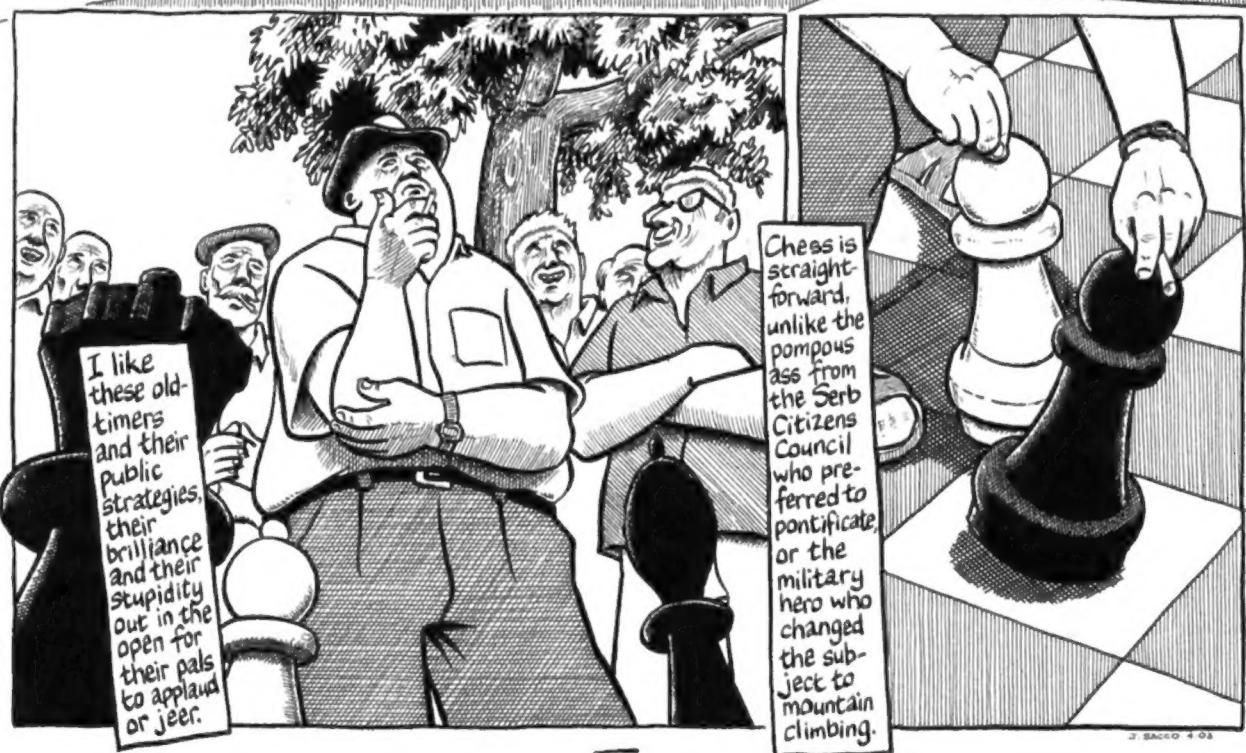
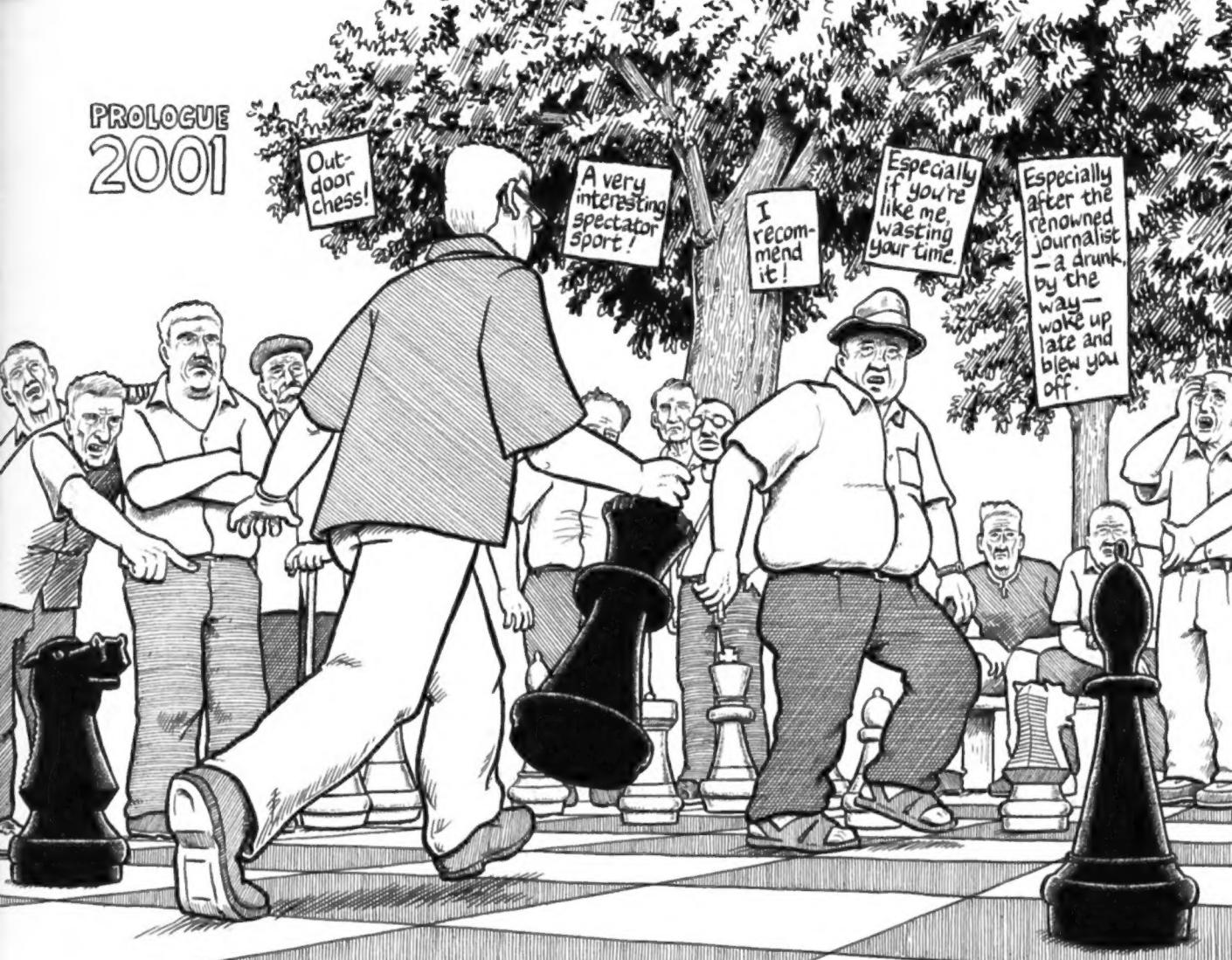
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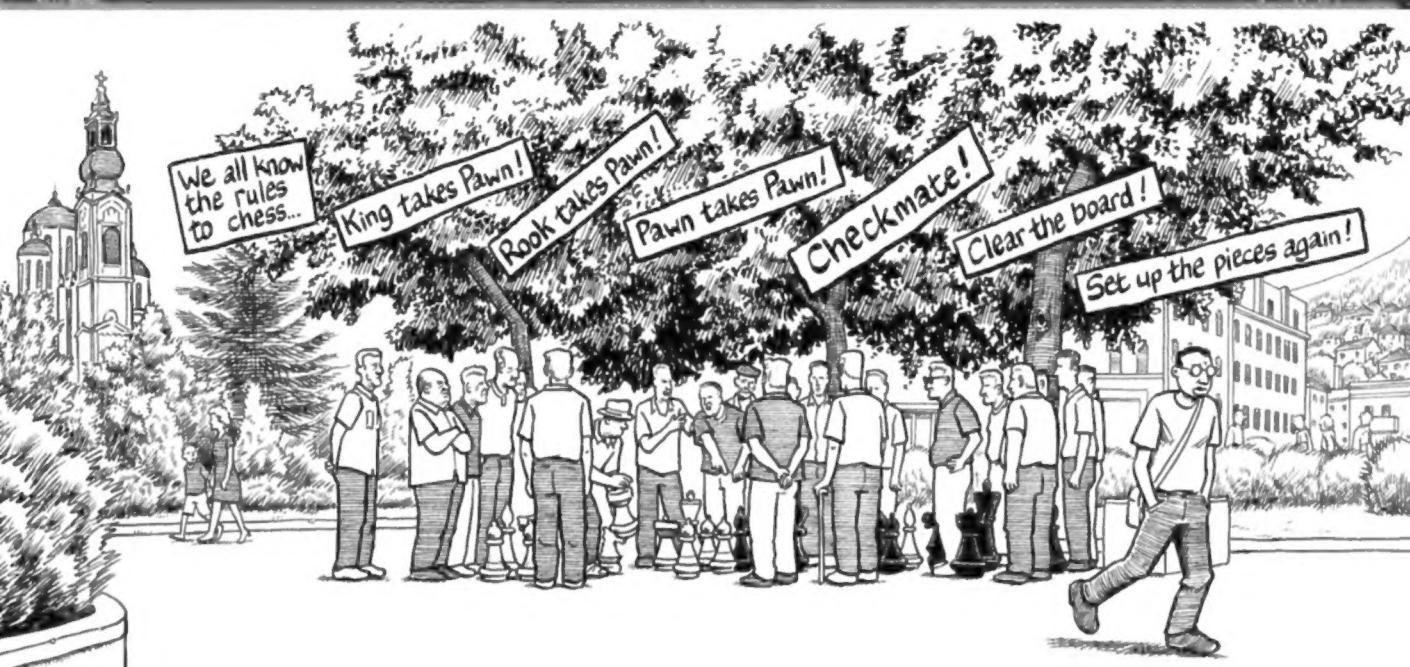
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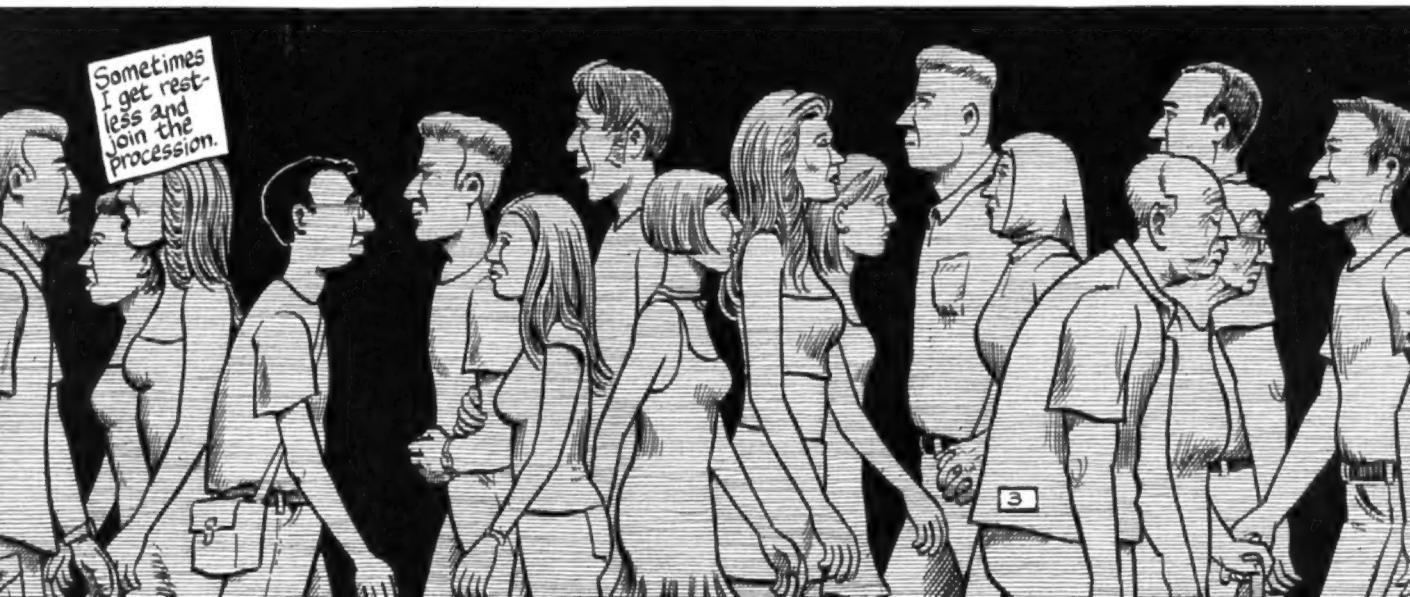
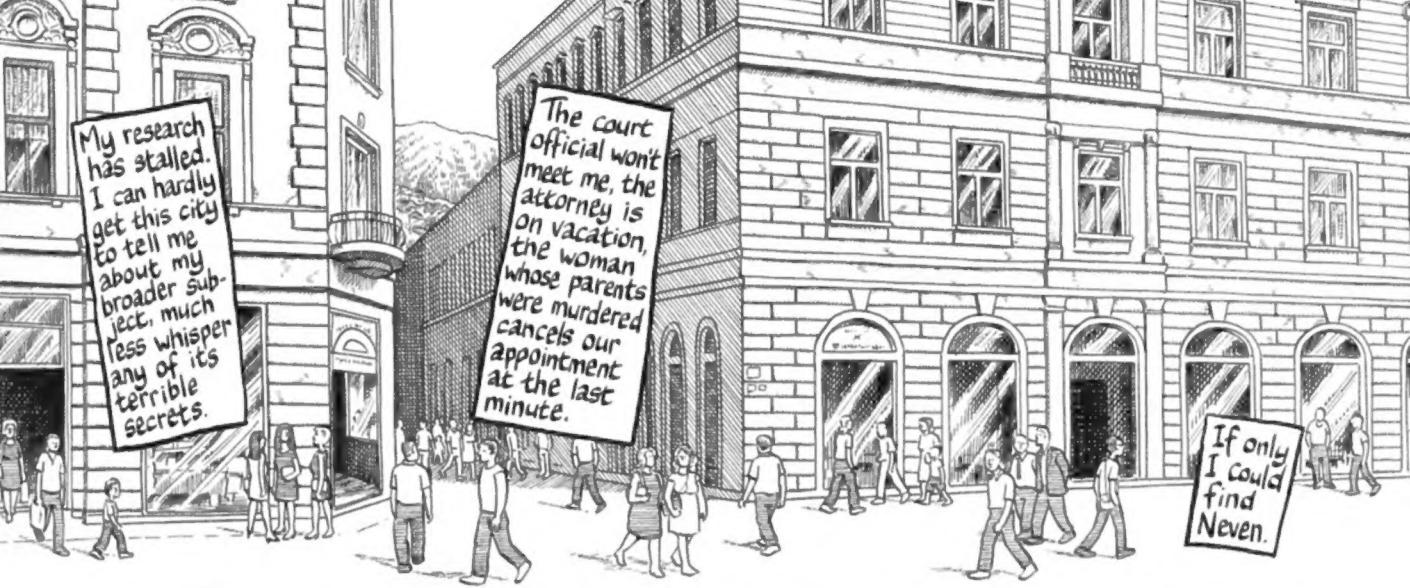
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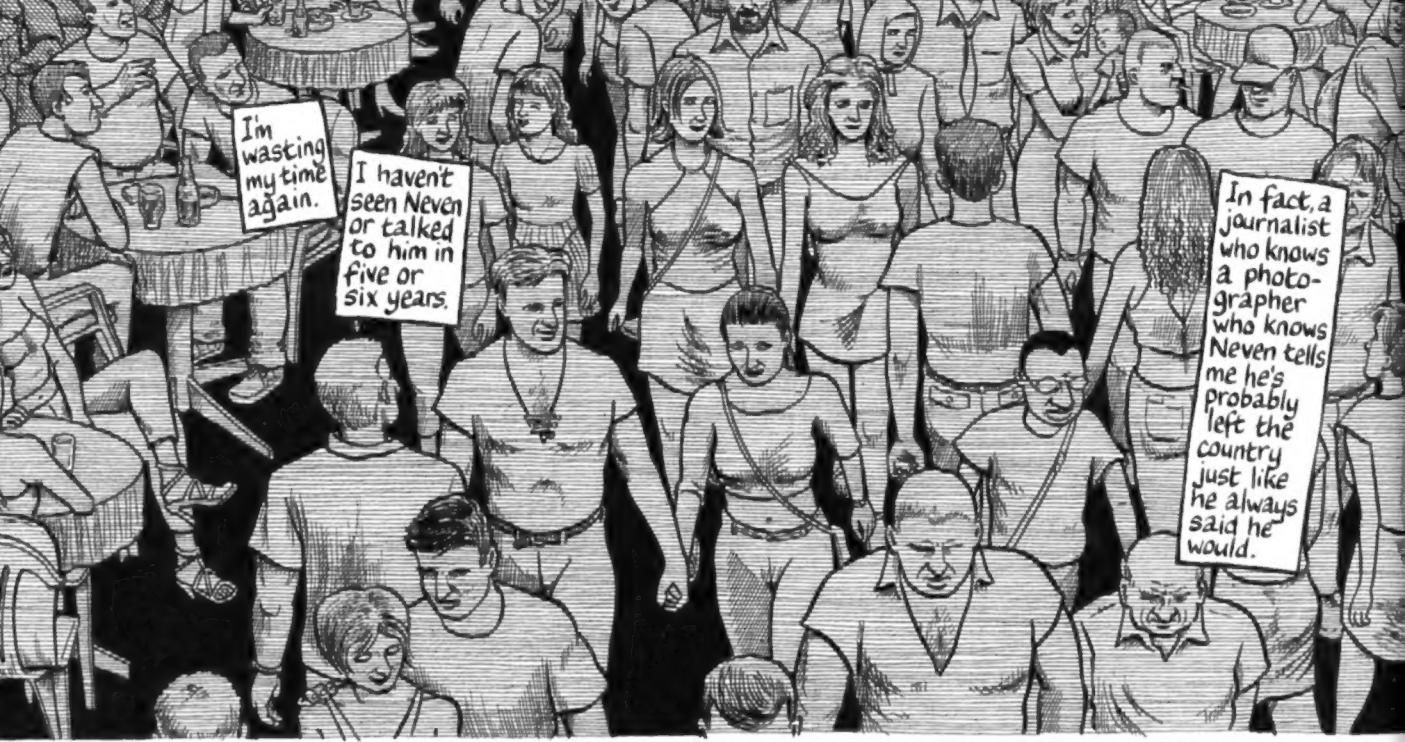


# PROLOGUE 2001



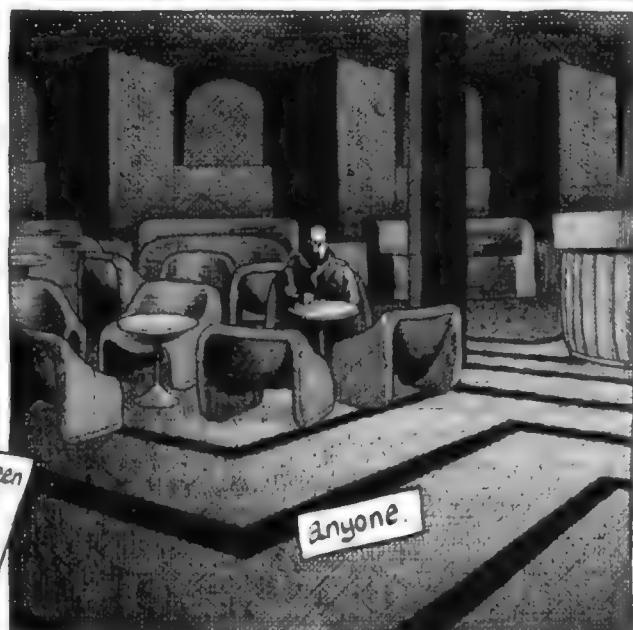
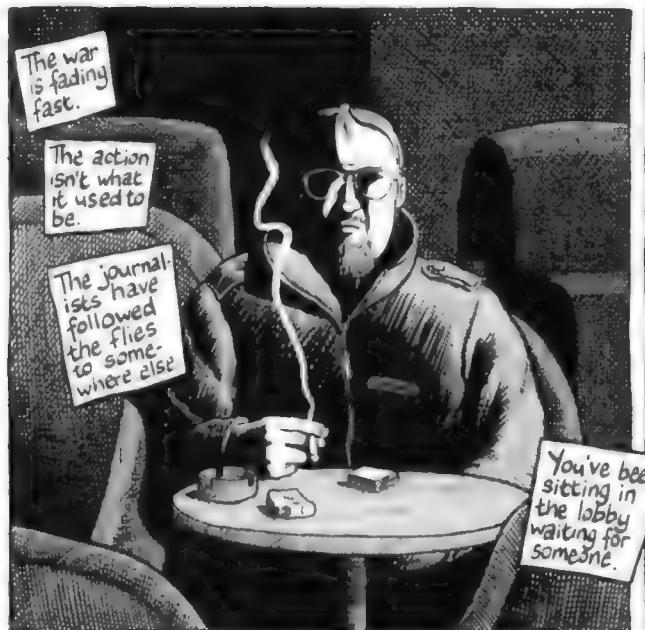






PROLOGUE  
1995

His name  
is Neven,  
and put  
yourself  
in Neven's  
shoes.





1995

FINDING  
HOOKERS.

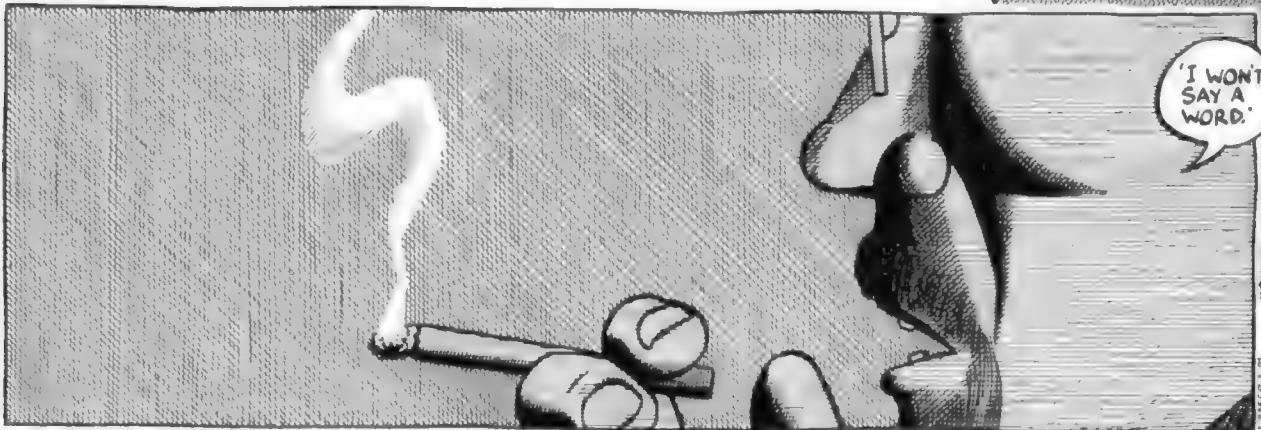
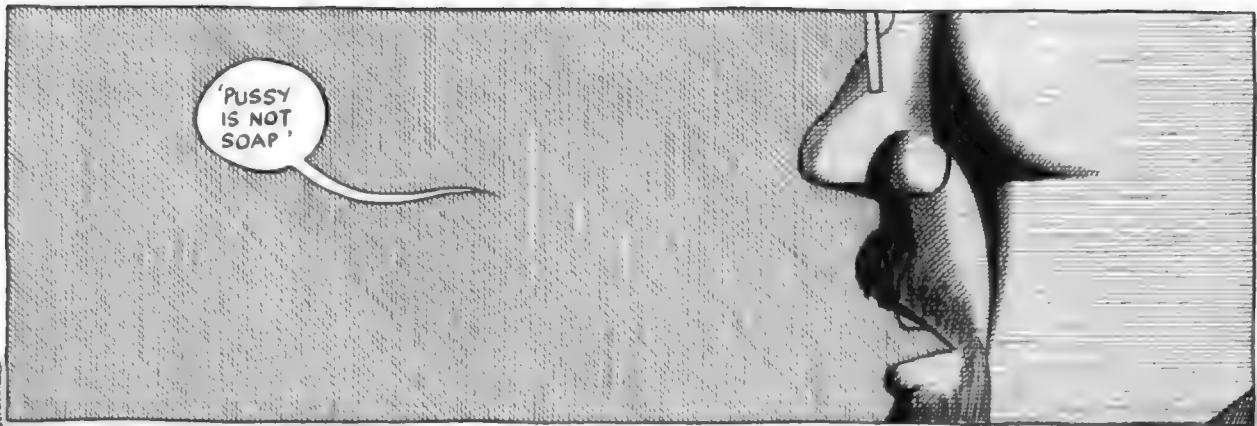
THAT'S  
PART OF THE  
PROGRAM.

IT'S  
COMPLETELY  
NORMAL.

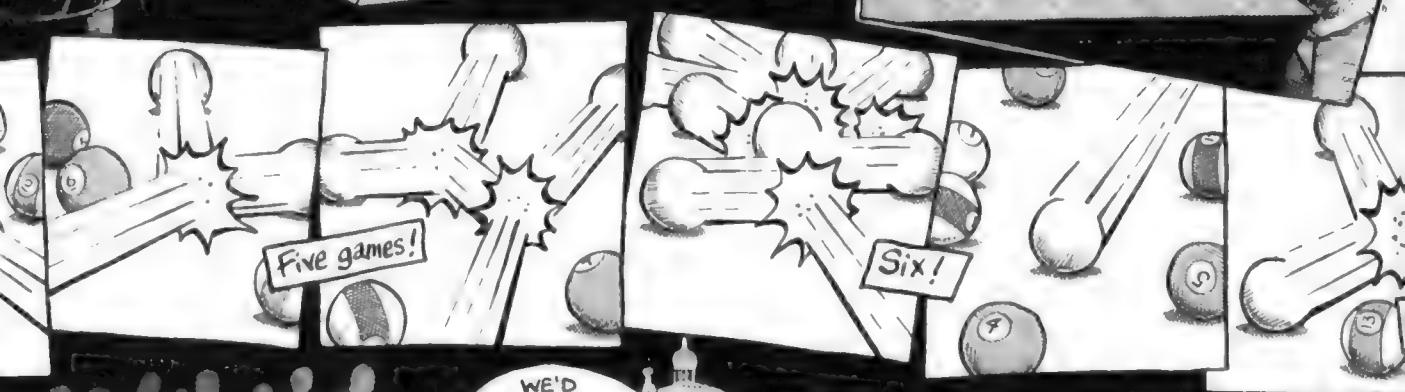
I'VE  
ARRANGED  
WHORES FOR  
JOURNALISTS  
ABOUT 12  
TIMES.

ONCE  
I FIXED UP  
A WOMAN WITH  
A PARTY OF  
SEVEN JOUR-  
NALISTS.

WHEN  
SHE HESITATED,  
I TOLD HER,  
'COME ON...'







The first time I met Neven he told me the government considered him a "criminal element and a security threat."

CAN YOU IMAGINE THE SORT OF MOVIE THAT COULD BE MADE ABOUT WILD FUCKING BASTARDS LIKE ME?!!

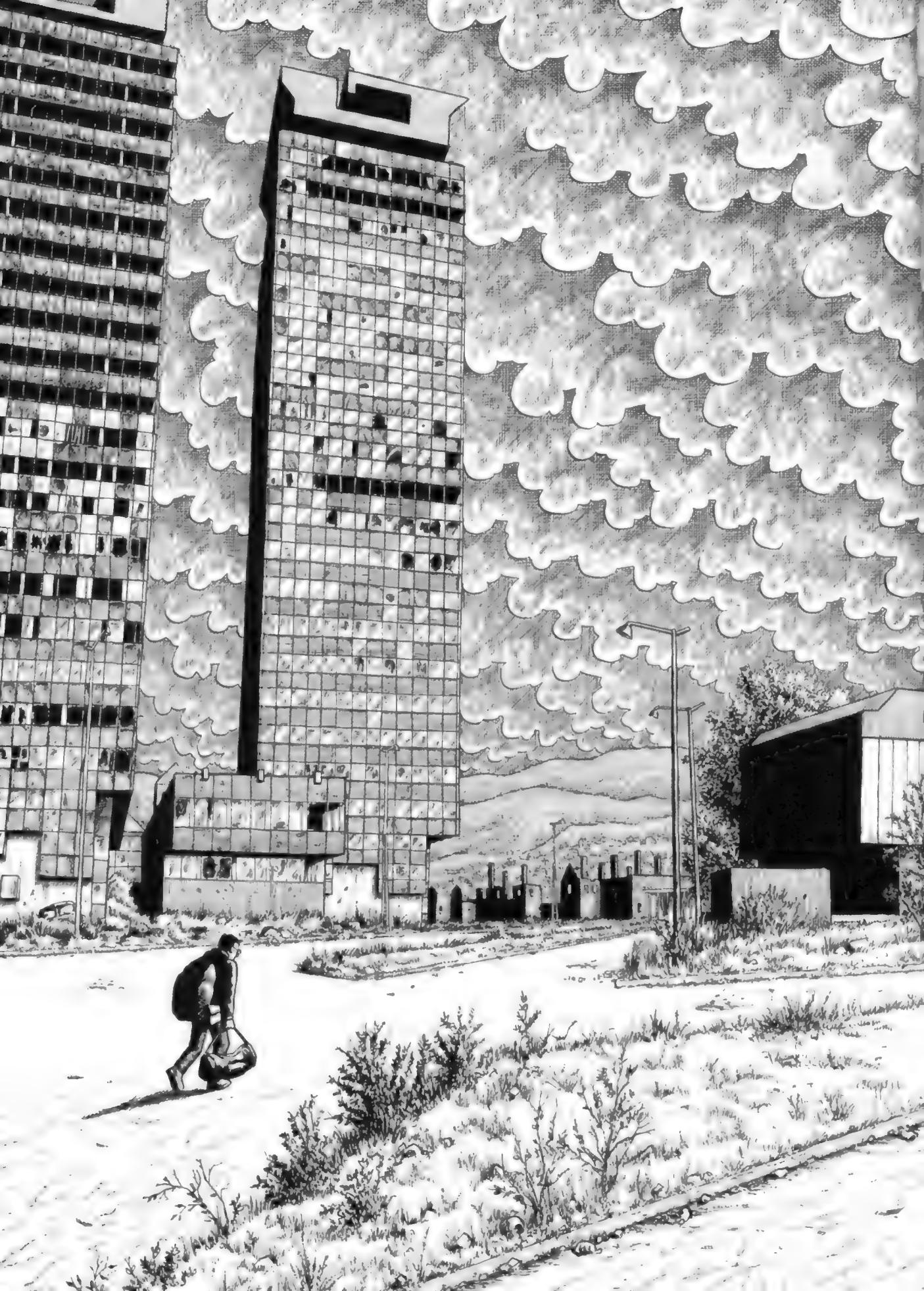
That was two weeks ago, and I'd forgotten everything my mother had told me about talking to strange men in hotel lobbies.

But put yourself in my shoes:

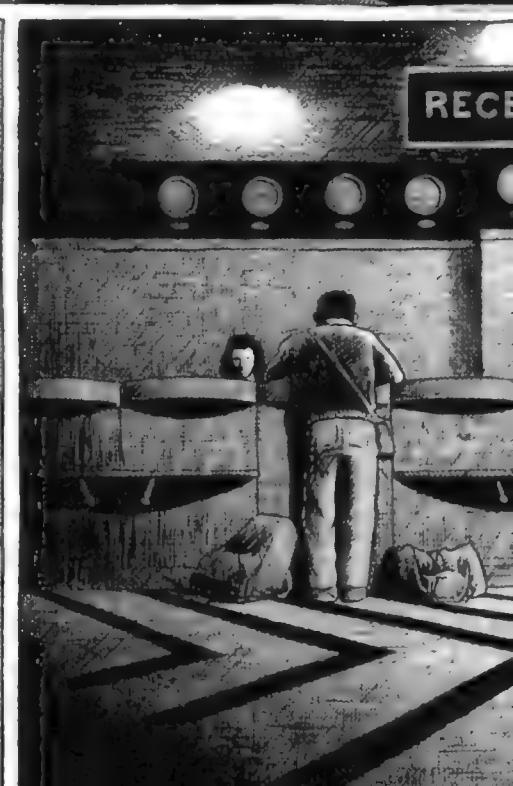
You've just arrived at the Great Siege...

your teeth are still rattling from the APC ride over Mt. Igman...

and someone has just pointed you down a road and into an awful silence...

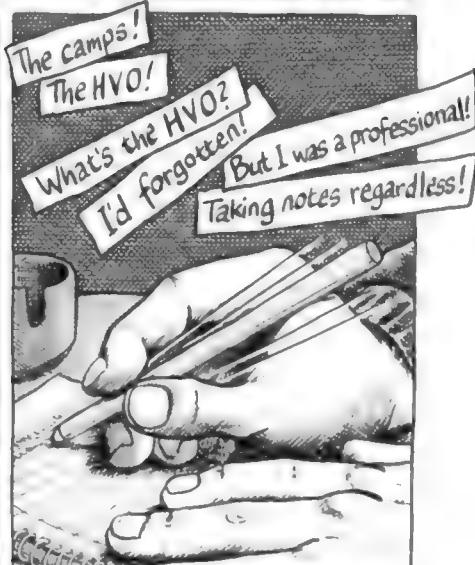
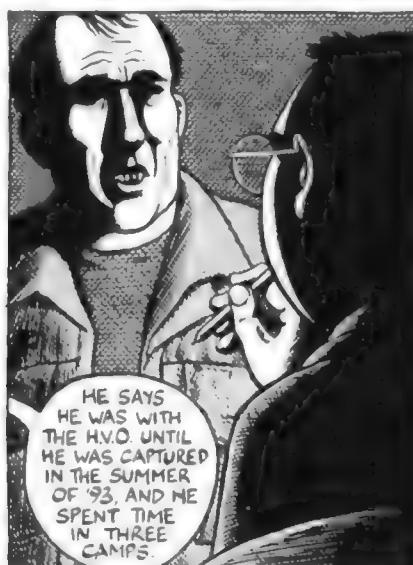


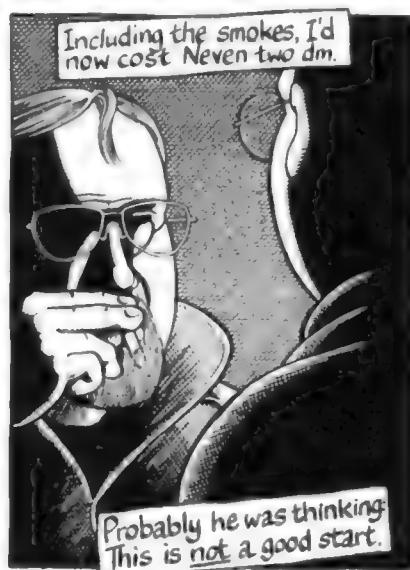
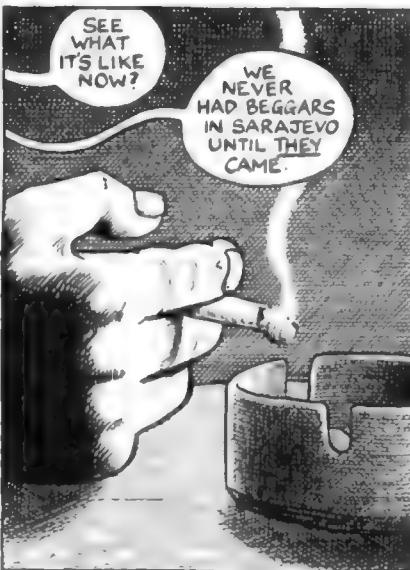
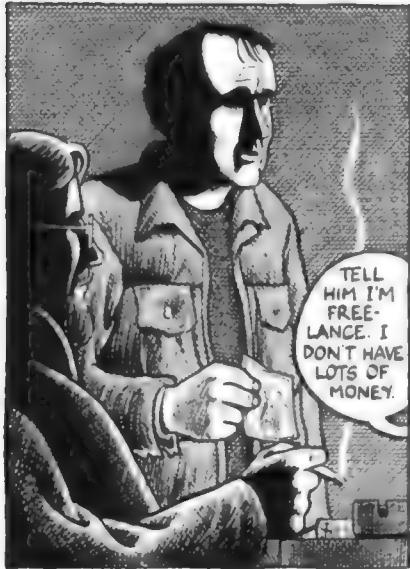


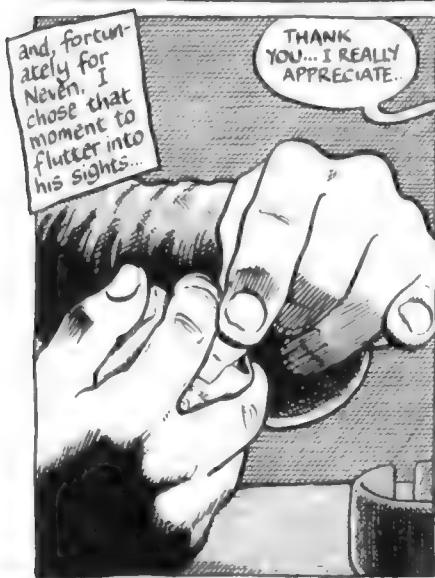






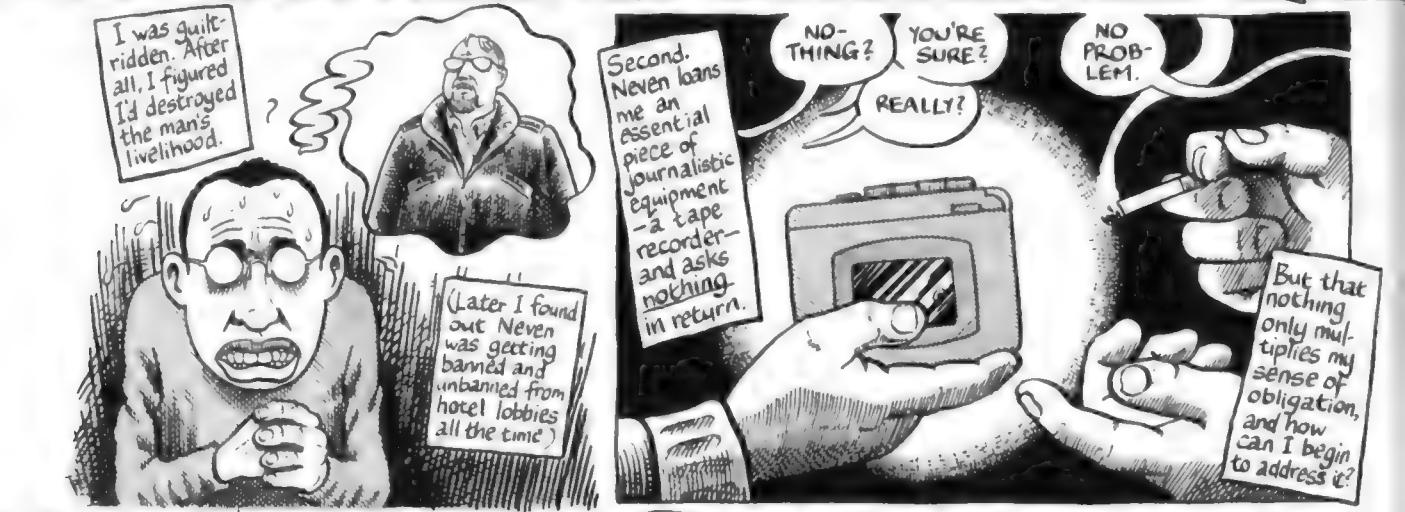








Anyway, he was no longer welcome to flush out his quarry in the Holiday Inn lobby, and lobbies — as points of congregation for all journalists — are a fixers happiest hunting grounds...





1984

Put your  
self in  
Neven's  
shoes.

You've done your  
stint in the  
Yugoslav People's  
Army. You were  
rated a weapons  
specialist, trained  
as a sniper.

Back in civilian  
clothes, you've  
got some bus-  
iness to take  
care of. Your  
brother—you  
describe him as  
"a wild sort of  
guy whose  
screws were a  
little bit loose"  
—crossed the  
wrong people in  
Los Angeles and  
got whacked.  
You're going to  
retrace his  
movements. They  
begin in Paris.



You get sidetracked there, mixed up  
with some tough guys from Britain, the  
States, South Africa, Belgium...



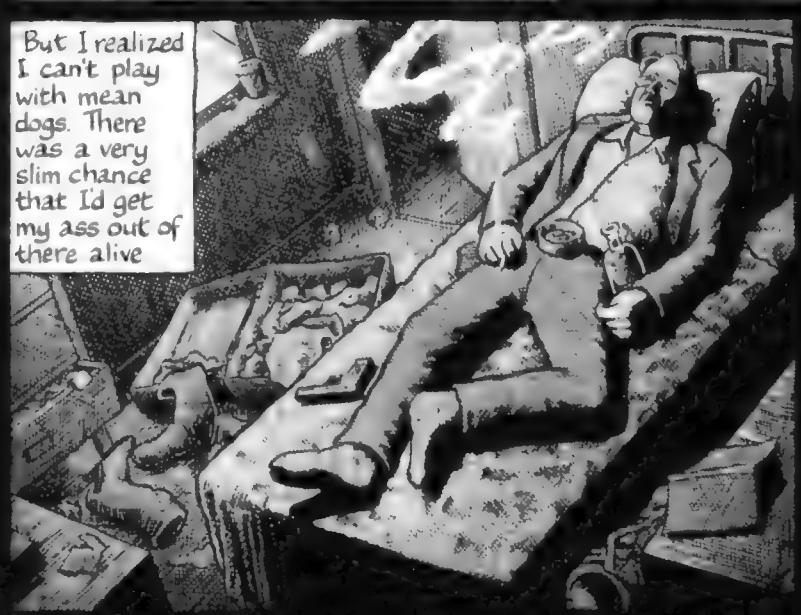
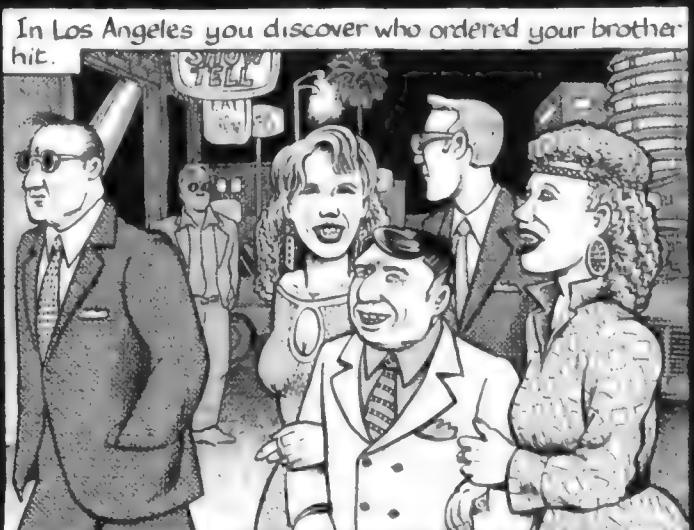
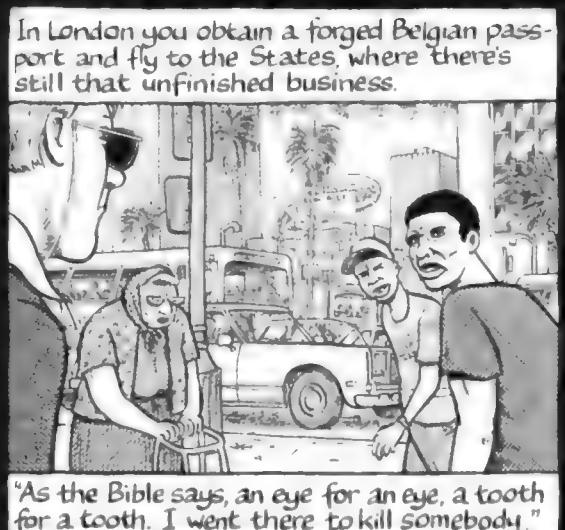
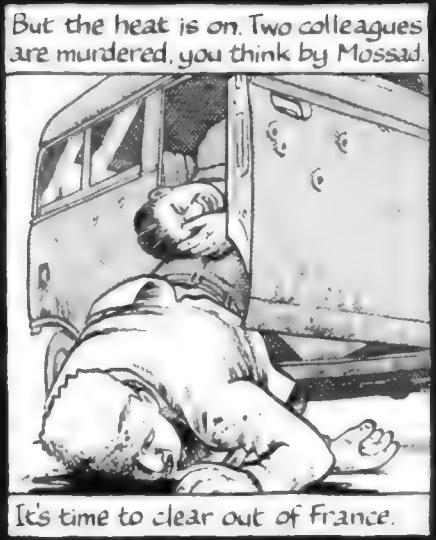
You participate in some illicit activi-  
ties... carjackings... "a bank robbery  
or two..."

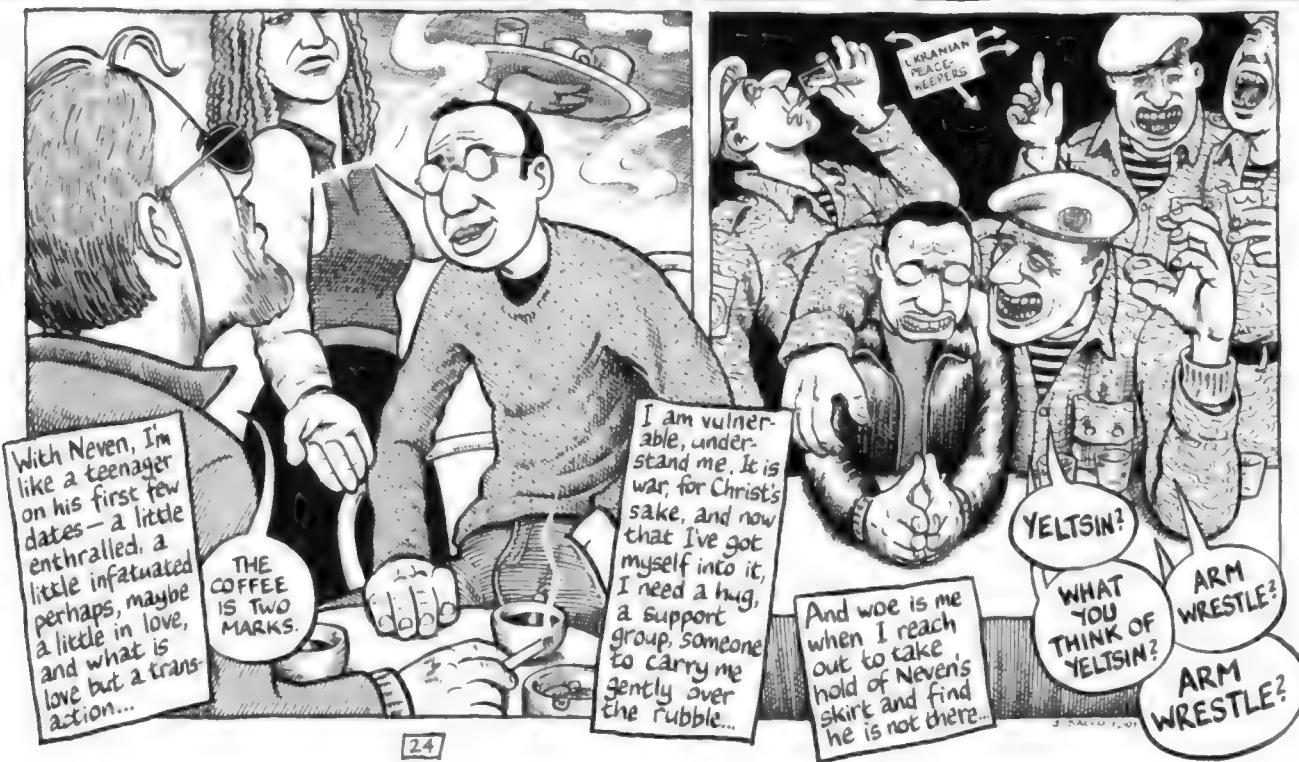


In Marseilles, you and your pals take out a large number of  
Algerians in a coffee-bar brawl over some girls.



Your gang is noticed and invited to join a larger enterprise.

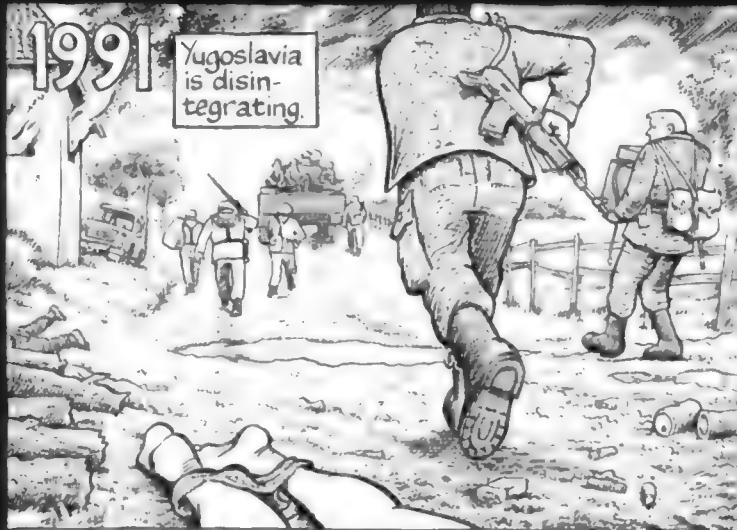






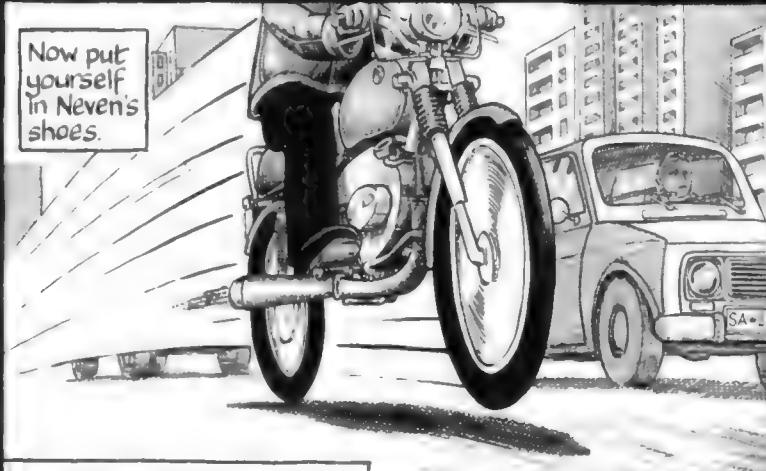
1991

Yugoslavia  
is disin-  
tegrating.



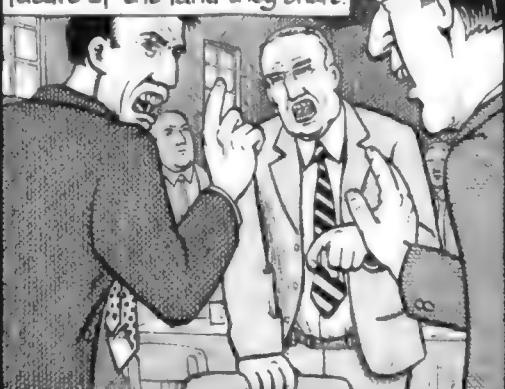
Neighboring Croatia is in the midst of a merciless ethnic war

The Muslim na-  
tionalist party,  
the SDA, has  
learned through  
its intelligence  
sources that  
the Serb na-  
tionalist party,  
the SDS, is  
organizing  
paramilitary  
groups in  
Bosnia, in  
order to carve  
out territory,  
expel non-Serbs,  
and link up  
with Serbia  
proper.



Your mother is a Muslim, but  
she left the family when you were eight months old. ("She always  
knew I'm going to be the same sort of punk like my father was,"  
you joke.) Your father is a Serb, and you were raised a Serb.

In Bosnia, the most ethnically mixed repub-  
lic, all is seemingly peaceful in the capital  
Sarajevo while Serb, Muslim, and Croat  
nationalist politicians heatedly debate the  
future of the land they share.



But something else is going on.

Muslims begin to build their own paramilitary  
structures, the Patriotic League and the so-  
called Green Berets, with SDA support.



Some friends of yours, who know about  
your military skills, ask you to join the  
Green Berets to help train recruits.





The Green Berets are not a single group, but a collection of autonomous armed cells built around popular or self-elected leaders.



One of the most charismatic of these men is Ismet Bajramovic, who is known as Celo.

Born  
in 1966...

## Ismet Bajramovic, AKA Celo\*

in 7th grade, after he punched his geography teacher in the face, his father told young Ismet he'd done the right thing, then beat up the boy...

he began dealing drugs while still in his teens...

invited to play for Sarajevo's soccer team, he was kicked out for beating up a teammate after his first practice.

WHEN HE WAS 19 HE WAS SENTENCED TO 11 YEARS IN PRISON FOR ATTEMPTED MURDER, RAPE, BREAKING AND ENTERING, BLAH BLAH BLAH...

OF THAT I BELIEVE ONLY THE CHARGE OF ATTEMPTED MURDER.

HE WAS SIMPLY TOO GOOD-LOOKING FOR RAPE.

Later Bajramovic would claim he'd had more than 300 women, that some had even asked him to take their virginity.

According to his own account, in prison Bajramovic earned the respect of the guards and warden by thrashing a problem convict.

HE WAS OUT OF PRISON AFTER FIVE AND A HALF YEARS, FREED BY AN ACT OF THE MINISTER OF POLICE, MR. ALIJA DELIMUSTAFIC.



Subsequently, the self-declared "strongest and most popular prisoner" was called upon to resolve disputes between inmates

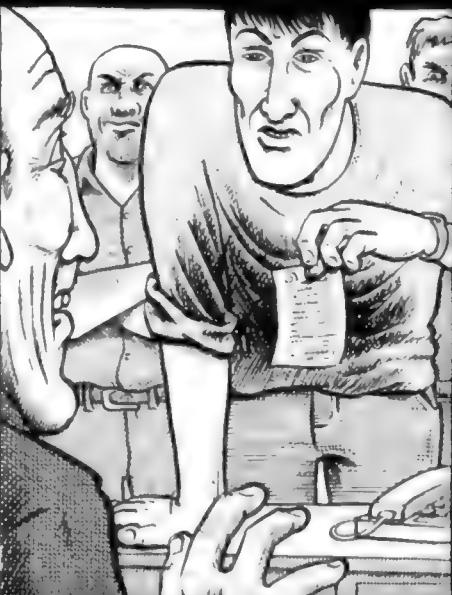
THAT HAPPENED SIX MONTHS BEFORE THE WAR.

Delimustafic, who had turned a chain of kiosks into Cenex, a major trading company, and had reportedly bought his cabinet post, was the richest man in Yugoslavia.



He employed Bajramovic as a personal bodyguard and a debt enforcer.

"I collected many debts, but I never used force," Bajramovic claimed later. He told those who were slow to pay Delimustafic that "there are other ways to collect payments. And it is interesting that none of them asked me about those other ways."



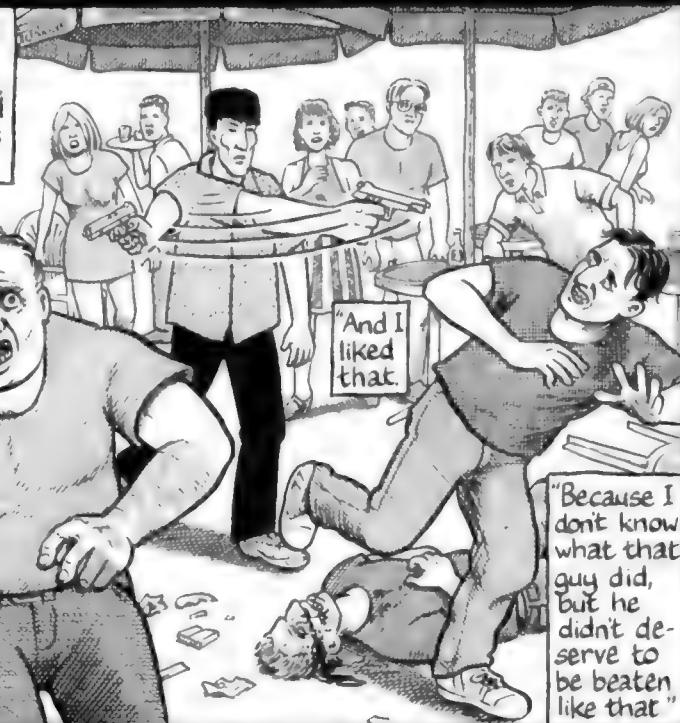
You know Bajramovic by reputation. "He was rather famous," you say.

One time you happen to be sitting at the same cafe when-



"Two guys suddenly started beating another guy."

"Celo stood up, pulled out his gun, and chased those guys away."



"And I liked that."

"Because I don't know what that guy did, but he didn't deserve to be beaten like that."

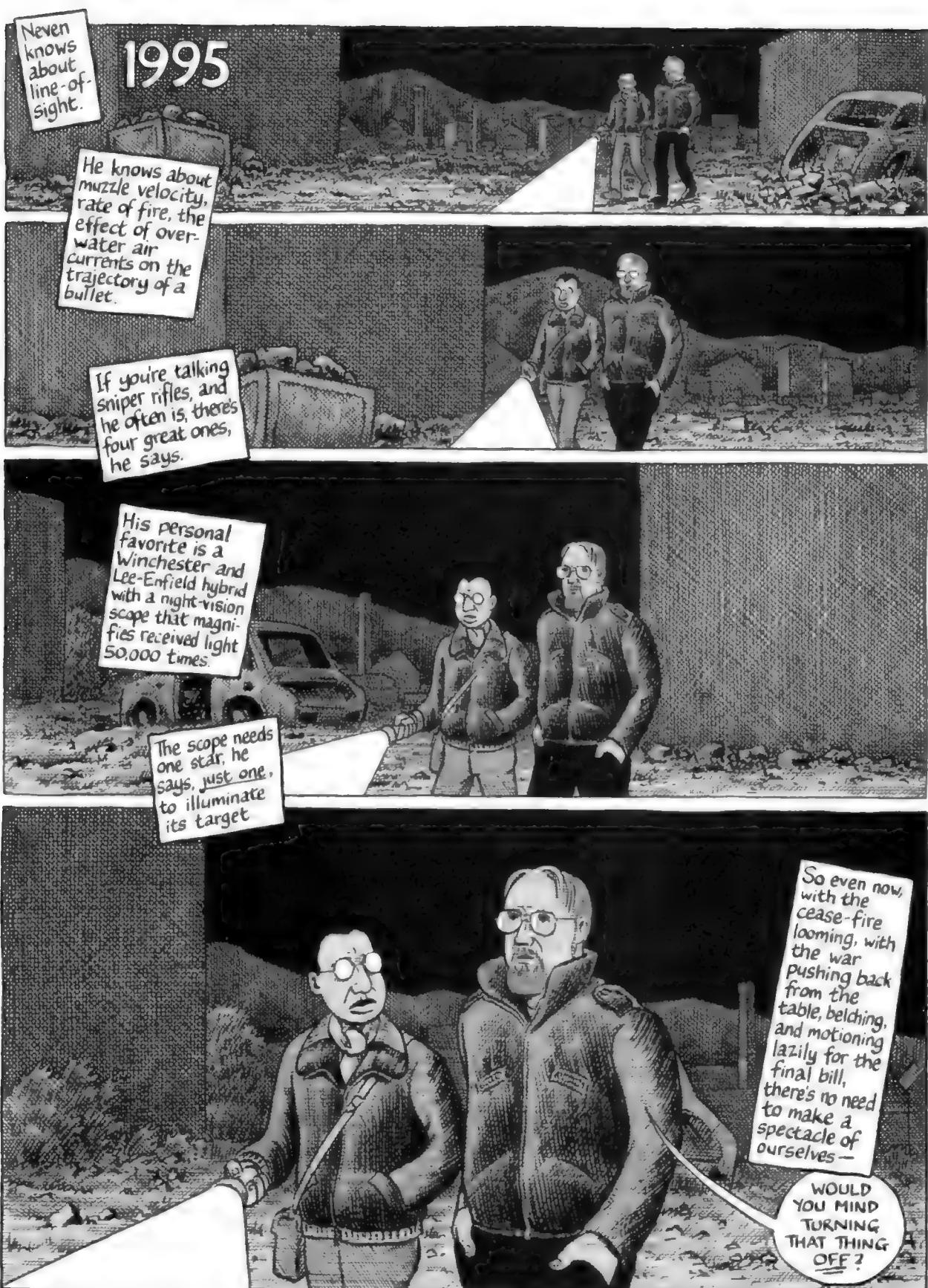
So as Bosnia's crisis comes to a head and you are invited to transfer to Celo's unit, you jump at the chance.

"He had a sort of aura, a sort of natural born sense of leadership," you say. "That's why people with better education, people like me, for instance, were following guys like that."

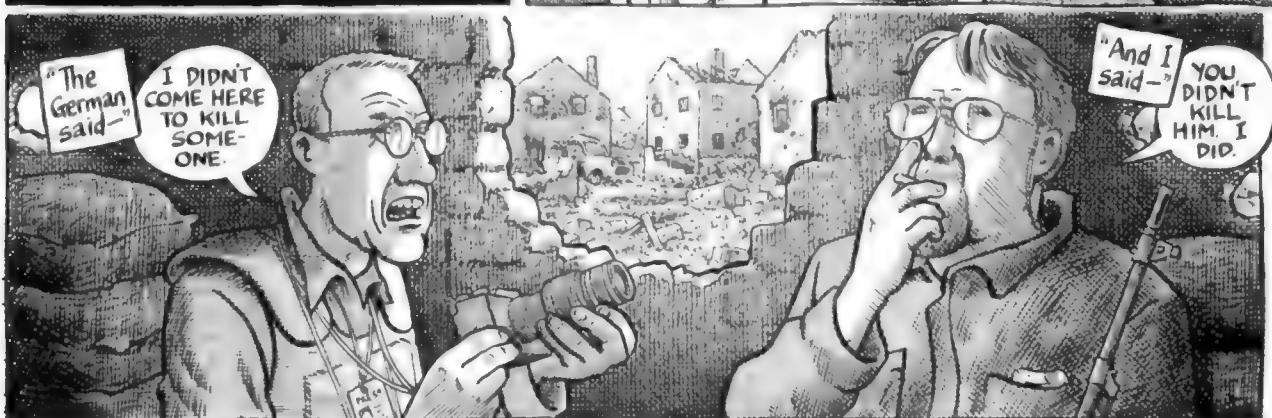
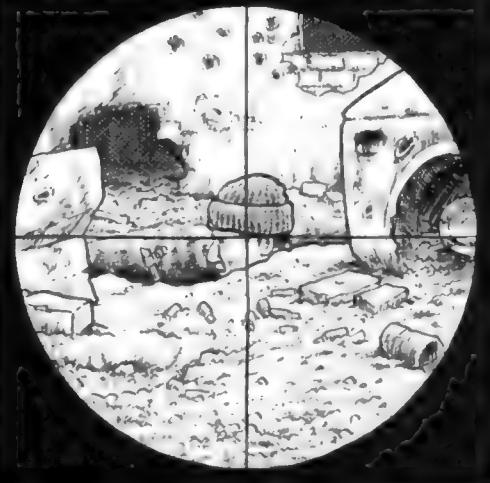
April 1992

"Then some bastards went to the hills and started shooting on my city..."

The war begins.



When he was a sniper, he says, he never killed civilians, only soldiers, people carrying weapons.



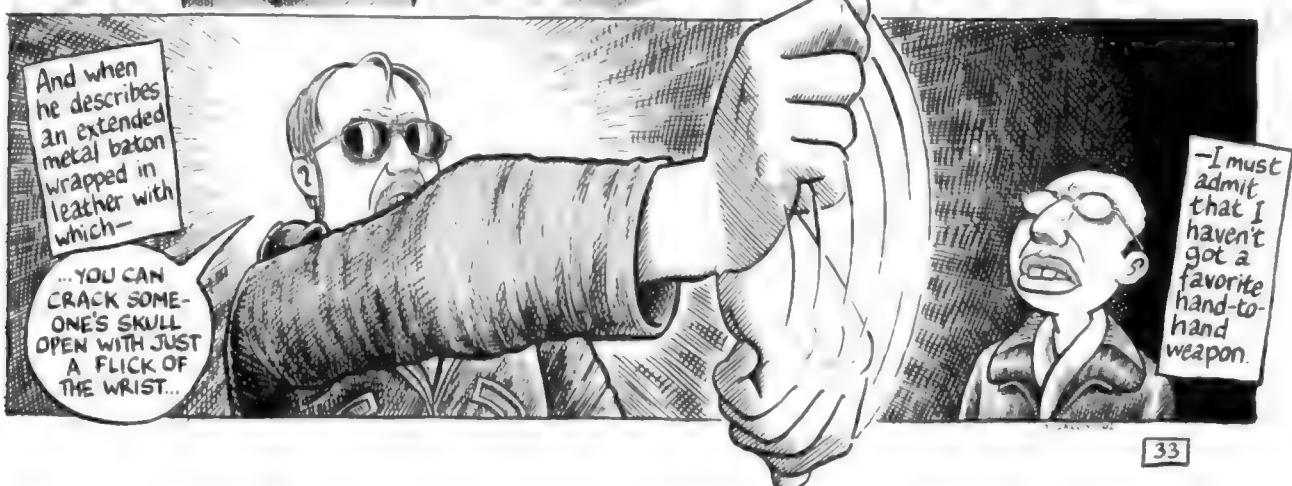
But the bond between us runs deeper than my pockets. It is a bond that hearkens back to the school-yard, where certain kinds of boys who are still afraid of girls find snobbish brotherhood in matching Everests of knowledge about the stuff between the toes of war.

MY OTHER FAVORITE ACTION WAS THE GERMAN CAPTURE OF THE BELGIAN FORTRESSES AT EBEN EMAEL.





But beyond the parity of such frothy exchanges, I must defer to Neven's preeminence in martial matters, for it is he, Neven, who has walked through the valley of the shadow of death and blown things up along the way.



On our walks around town, Never points out locations as if at a giant movie lot where someone had once given him a few good scenes and yelled, "Action!"

THEY CAME ACROSS THE RIVER AND MY FRIEND HAD HIS HEAD BLOWN OFF.

I LOST MY NERVE AND RAN FOR COVER BEHIND SOME TRAMS.

THE BULLET WENT THROUGH MY RIGHT THIGH.

ON THE WAY TO HOSPITAL I TOLD THE DRIVER TO STOP SO I COULD BUY A PACK OF CIGARETTES.

I WANT TO SHOW YOU THIS PHOTOGRAPH.

THIS IS ME.

OF ALL THESE MEN, ONLY FOUR OF US ARE STILL ALIVE.

IT WAS TAKEN SHORTLY BEFORE WE WENT INTO ACTION AGAINST THE 43 TANKS.

Ahhh, the 43 tanks again. I've heard this story before (You'll hear it yourself before too long.)

WHEN I WROTE AN ARTICLE ABOUT THAT ACTION FOR A BRITISH MAGAZINE - SOMETHING LIKE 'SOLDIER OF FORTUNE' - I GOT BACK A REJECTION LETTER.

IT SAID, 'WE DON'T PRINT FICTION.'

THE COFFEES COST TWO MARKS.



1992

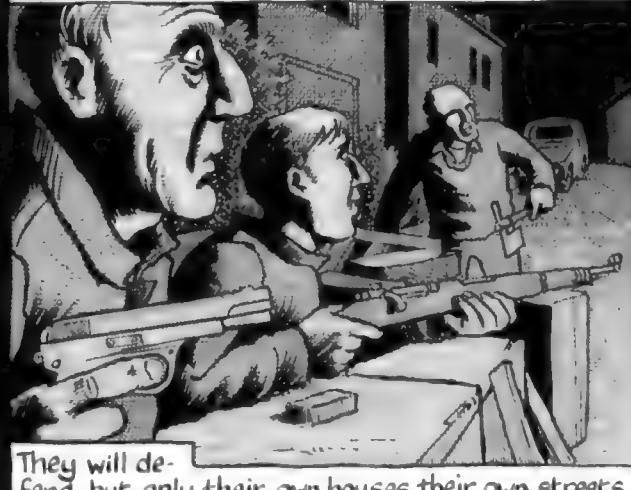
Who will  
defend  
Sarajevo?

Before Yugoslavia began to break up, Bosnia's Territorial Defense — essentially its home guard — was ordered to turn over its armaments to the federal Yugoslav People's Army (JNA).



Now, as the war begins, the JNA puts hundreds of tanks and artillery pieces into the hands of the rebel Serbs. Against this overwhelming firepower, the Bosnian government must build an army almost from scratch.

In the meantime, ordinary citizens of Sarajevo, with whatever weapons they have, organize themselves into units by apartment block or neighborhood.



The police and its special units, the equivalent of SWAT teams, provide more mobile forces, but they have been reduced by significant defections — many Serb police have gone over to the other side.



They will defend, but only their own houses, their own streets.



At the moment, it is up to the paramilitaries, the already constituted Green Berets, to fill the many gaps that remain.

In those first few weeks the Bosnian government makes its first attempt to form a unified command from the official and autonomous units active in Sarajevo.



Other larger, more powerful paramilitary units are incorporated into the government's nascent military structure. These units are led by figures, often with petty criminal backgrounds, who would soon become, like Celo Bajramovic, military pop idols. Three in particular would make a lasting impression on Sarajevo:





Before the war he was known as a tough guy. He started an agency called Green Berets, a debt enforcement agency. And he was always boasting that he actually gave the name to the [paramilitary] Green Berets."



Juka was severely wounded in a prewar shootout and otherwise battered. One of his legs had been shattered and one of his arms was almost useless.

When the war began his troops, known as the Wolves, fought hard, and Juka developed a glamorous reputation as a war-time commander..



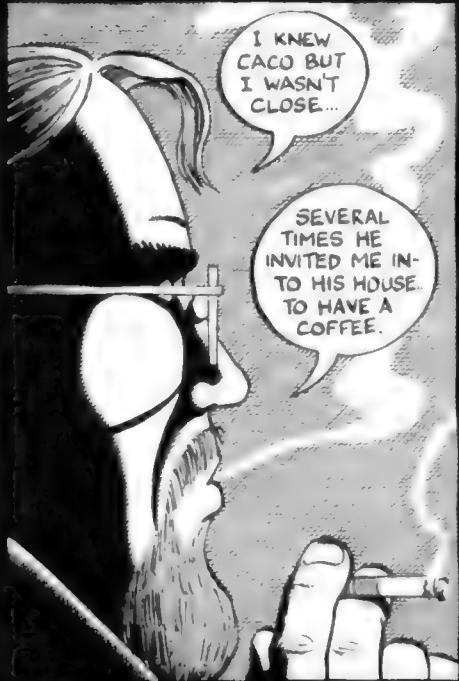
He was often on TV... pop songs were composed in his honor... his unit grew rapidly...



"His people were loyal to him mostly because he took good care of them. He saw that they were well fed, that they were well armed, to the best of his abilities, that they had ammunition."



## Musan Topalovic AKA Caco\*



He was not a criminal before the war but a folk musician...as conflict with rebel Serbs seemed imminent, he organized an elite Green Beret unit called Bosna 10.

His unit, incorporated into the army as the Tenth Mountain Brigade, was responsible for one of the most dangerous and strategic front lines, on Trebevic Mountain, immediately above his stronghold in Sarajevo's Bistrik neighborhood.





Caco's exploits in battle became the stuff of legend and myth.

## Ramiz Delalic AKA Celo\*



Delalic lived in Italy, but returned to Bosnia to smuggle weapons to the fledgling paramilitary groups.

He claimed to have taken part in one of the incidents that fanned the enmity between Serbs and Muslims, the murder of a Serb in a Sarajevo wedding party on the day of Bosnia's independence referendum.



"He had a big unit... Some of his soldiers were quite good... but they held so-called soft lines."

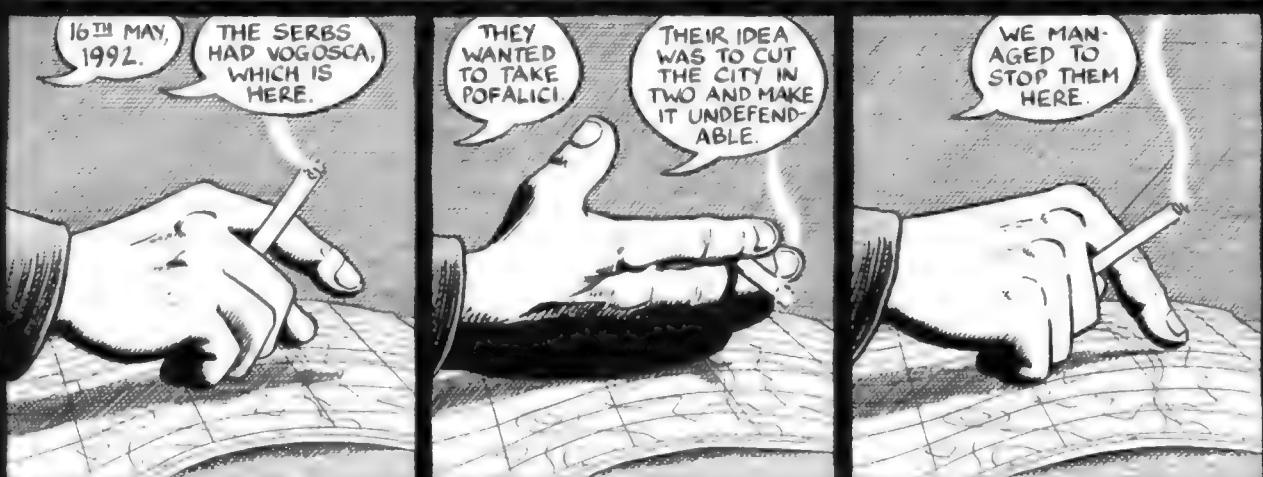


As the government tries to line up loose cannons like Delalic and the other paramilitaries, rebel Serbs have settled into the heights and rain artillery and sniper fire down on Sarajevo.

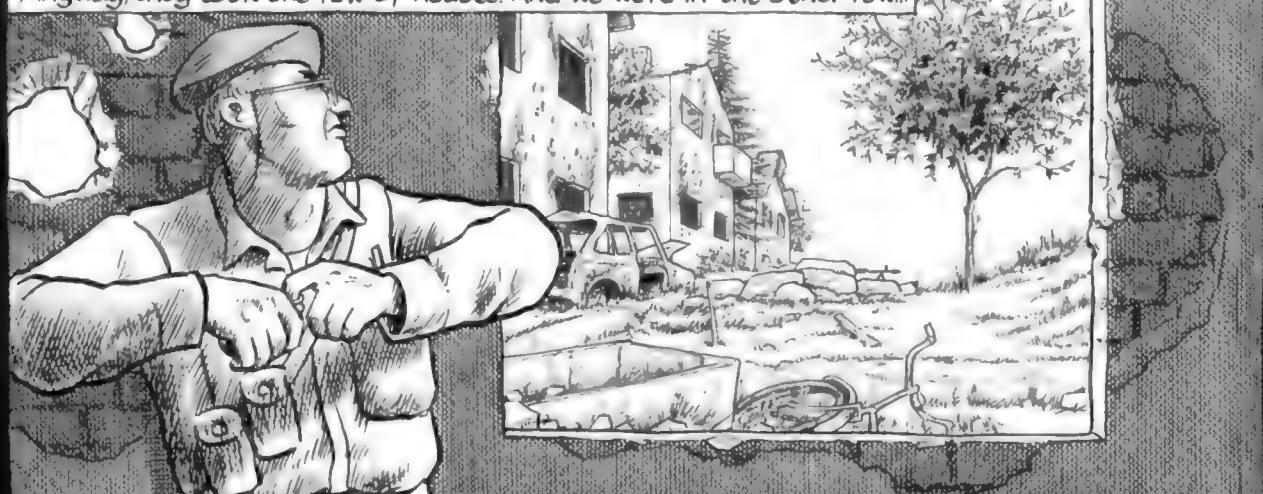


The city is surrounded, and there is a war to fight.

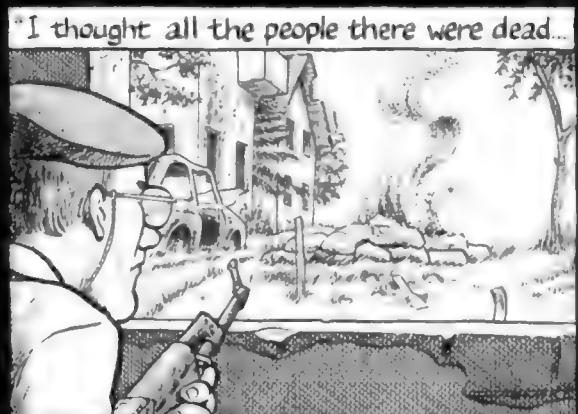
You are in the thick of it.



Anyway, they took one row of houses. And we were in the other row...



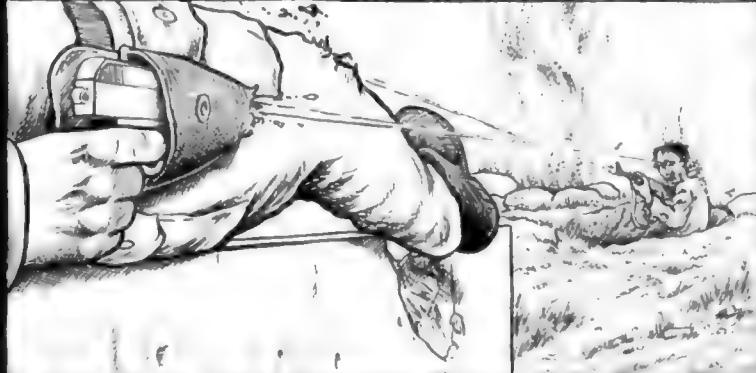
"In the middle of the field was a machine-gun embankment made from cement bags.



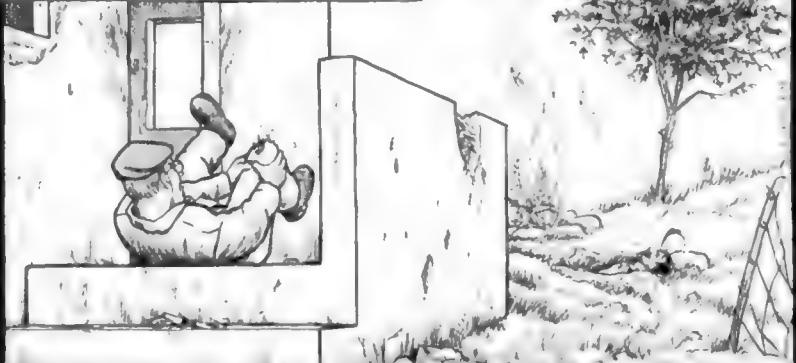
"thought he was dead... I threw myself backward and he hit me, and I pulled the trigger... I was



"shooting through the holster... It was a stroke of luck. It was like in the Doc Holiday movies.



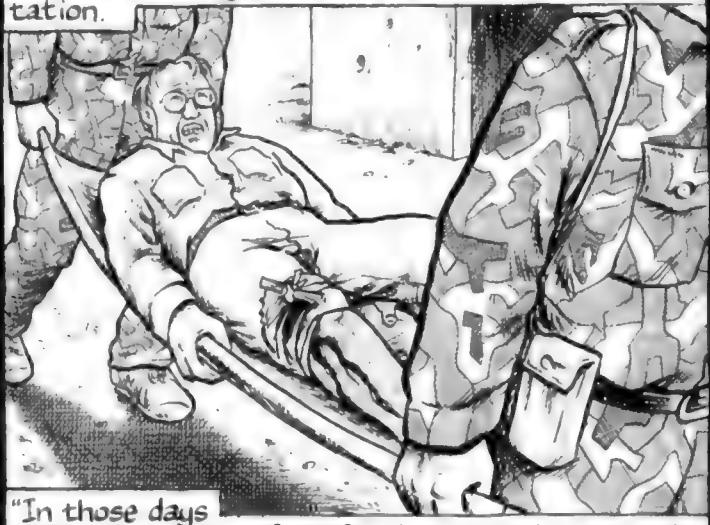
"And Celo started calling me the most precise hands in Central Bosnia..."



"Imer Pezo and Celo, they ran down and dragged me back."



"I couldn't walk. That first moment, I thought the bastard broke my knee, and that would mean amputation."

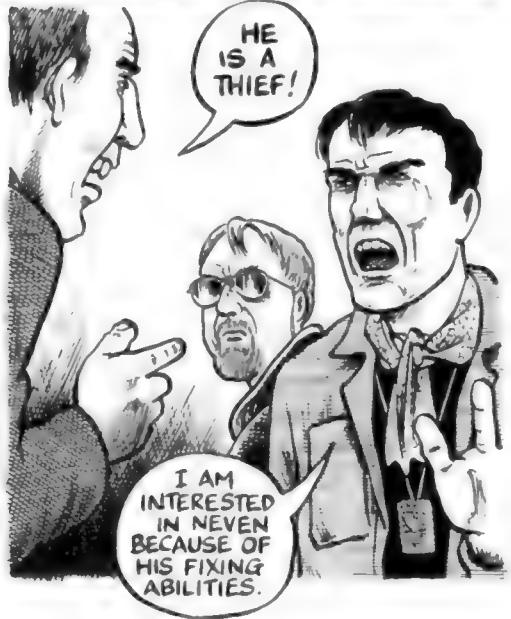


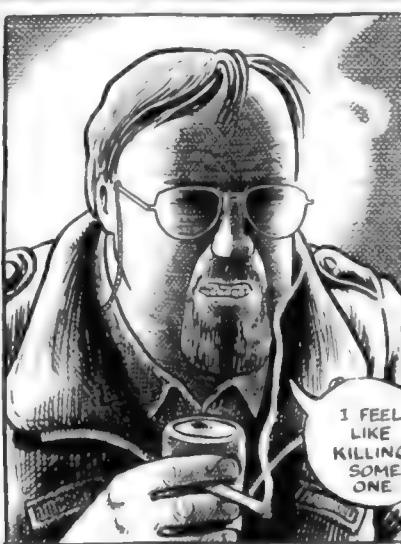
"In those days there was no time for refined orthopedic surgery."

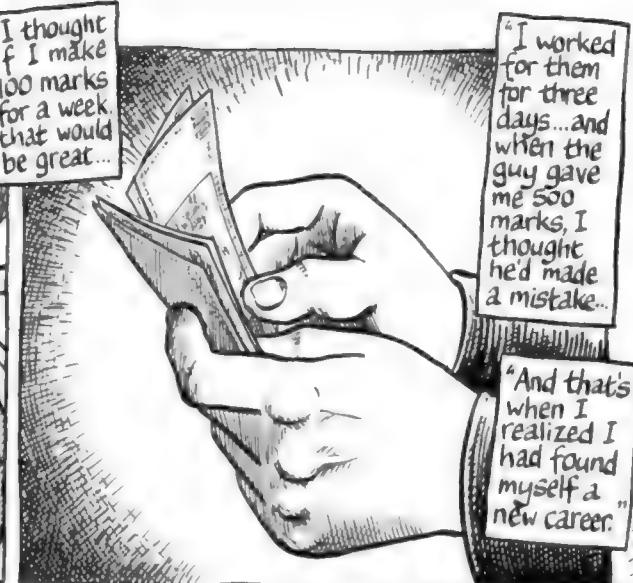












"And that's when I realized I had found myself a new career."



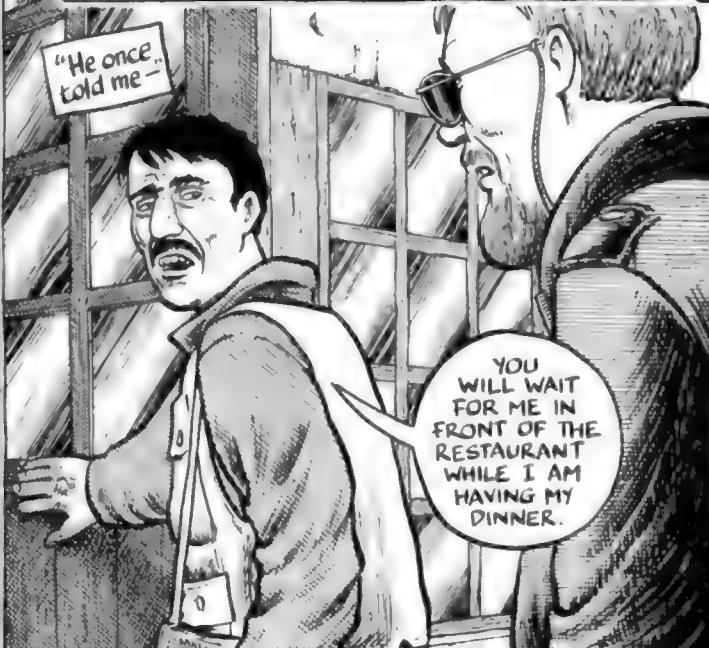
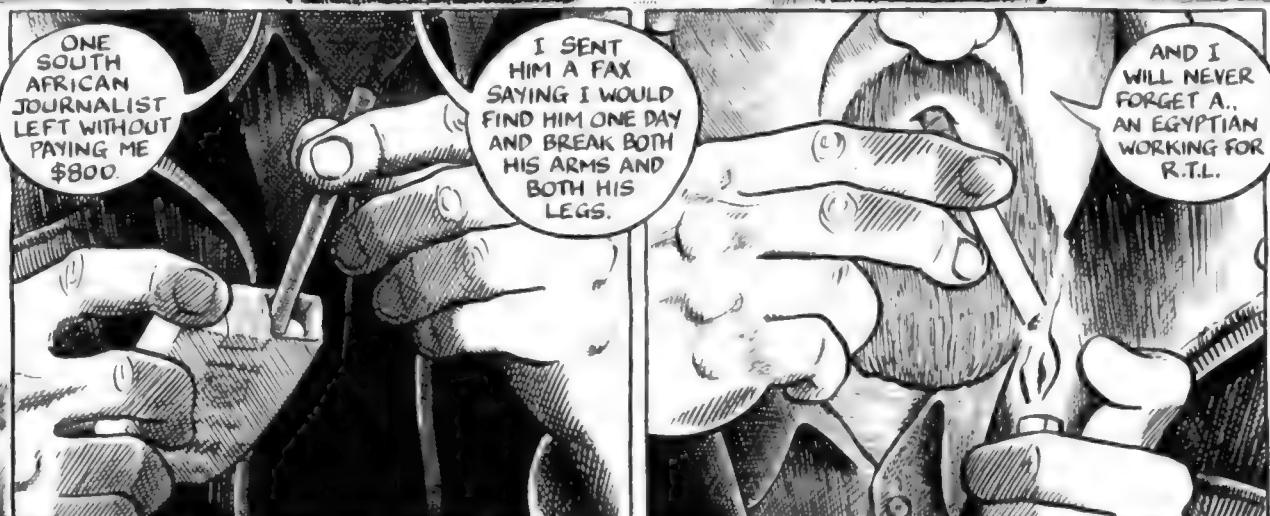
And where does that leave Never?

Put your self in his shoes.

You've got a stack of business cards representing 70 media organizations - 'The Boston Globe,' 'The Chicago Tribune,' 'The Los Angeles Times,' 'The Washington Post,' 'The Sunday Times,' television stations left and right, you name it - and fond memories of a few journalists you say are your friends.

But so what?

All the money's gone and it wasn't always good times.



# 1992

The television images serve up the essential truth: a city is trapped, its citizens shelled in their apartments and shot down in the streets by Serb nationalists who have already slaughtered and expelled tens of thousands elsewhere in Bosnia

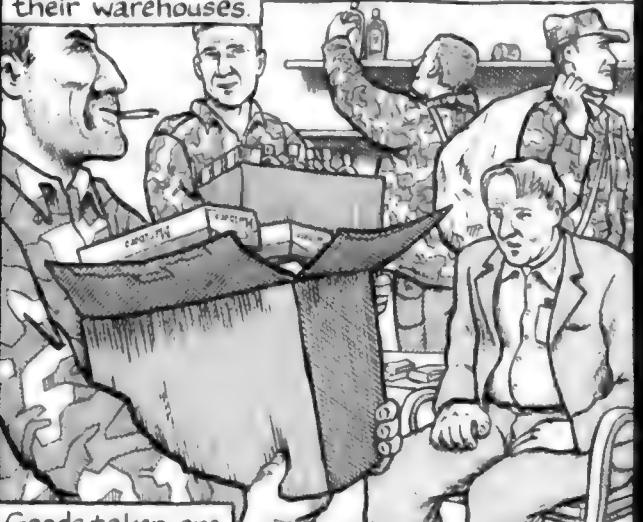
But there are murky depths beneath the flashy brutality of Sarajevo's war.



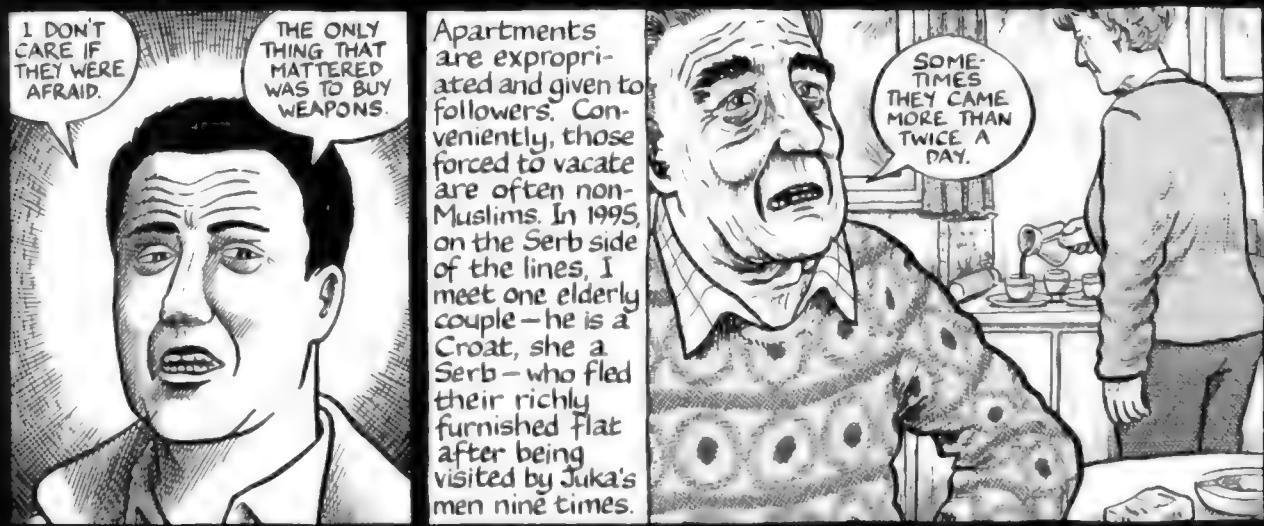
In May 1992, the first warning goes out. Bosnian army Colonel Jovan Divjak sends a letter to President Alija Izetbegovic outlining the looting and other illegal activities carried out by the para-military forces—now troops and police technically under government control. In 2001 Divjak tells me:

AND THE PRESIDENT REPLIED THAT IT'S NORMAL IN ANY WAR THAT THESE THINGS HAPPEN.

The quasi warlords are making their own rules. They raid food and department stores to fill their warehouses.

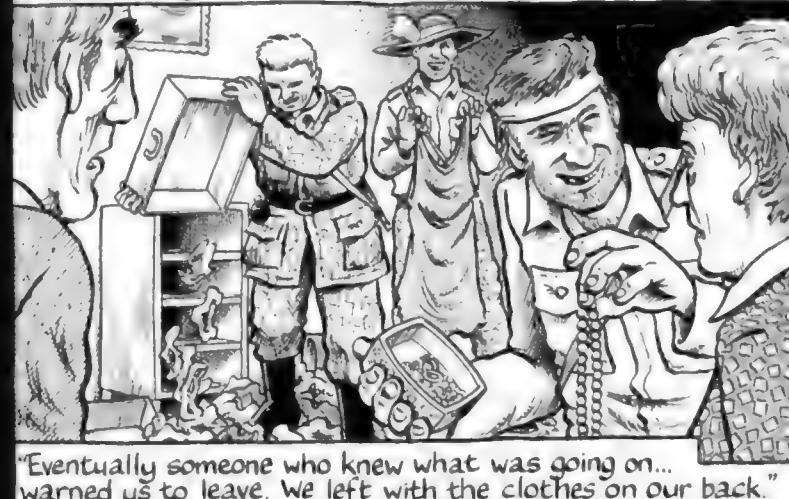


Goods taken are sold on the black market or distributed among supporters to consolidate their power bases.



"They came with guns, and they said they were looking for weapons. They went through everything."

Later they learned that Juka's men had distributed their belongings and installed refugees from Gorazde in their flat.

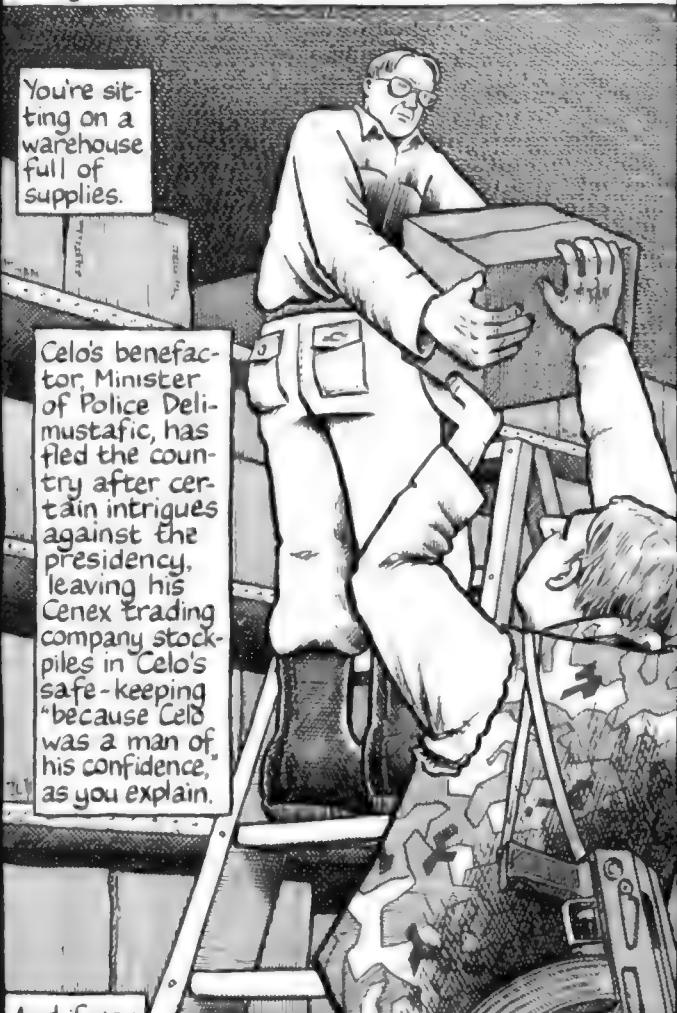


In a city that is cut off and being starved into submission, some strongmen continue to live large. According to Divjak, when Juka's wife gave birth and Juka wanted to celebrate, he threw a huge party featuring some of Sarajevo's most popular singers and gave out 80 bottles of whisky."

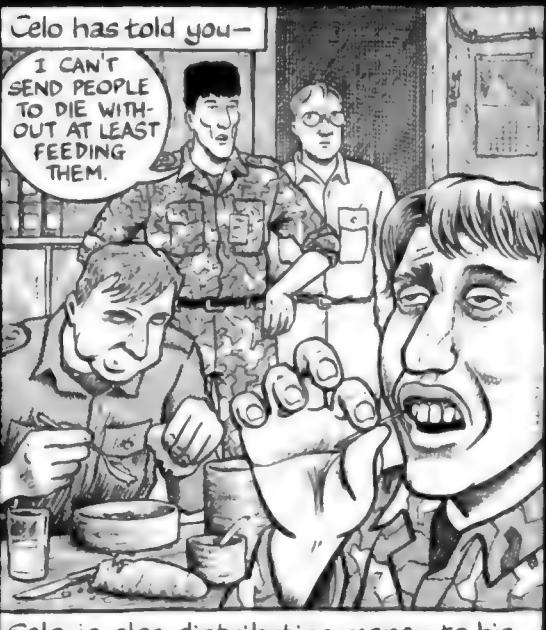


Well, you may ask yourself, why not? Shouldn't those defending the city have their privileges? For example, put yourself in Neven's shoes.

And, further, if you confiscate goods from state-owned shops -



And if you and Celo's men take what you want from those things that are "bound to spoil," what's wrong with that?"



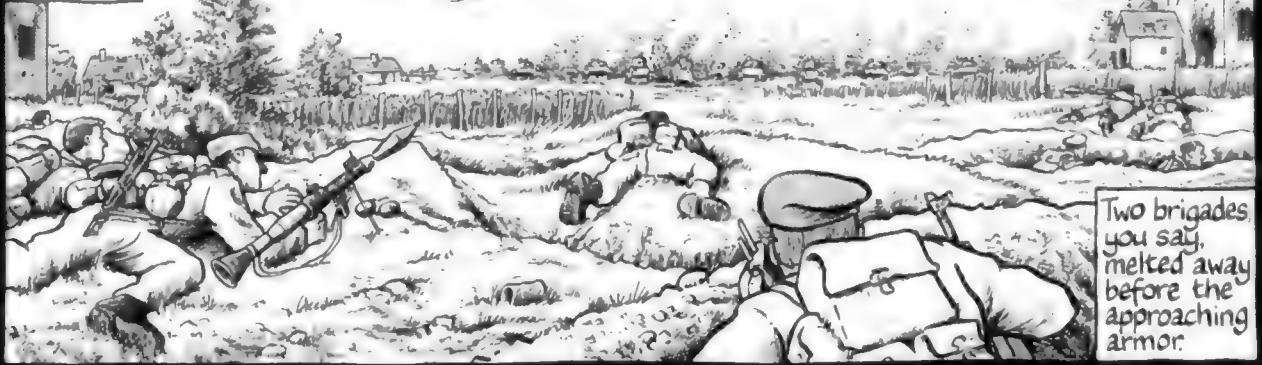
Celo is also distributing money to his soldiers, probably cash left by Delimustafic though you "can't vouch for that."



"We were living at our headquarters, but we were free to go home whenever we wanted. And most of us had Motorola radios so we could be summoned. There was a list of our addresses — our apartments, our girlfriends, second girlfriends, third girlfriends; and so on — and the driver would come and pick us up. If there was an emergency, they'd find us."

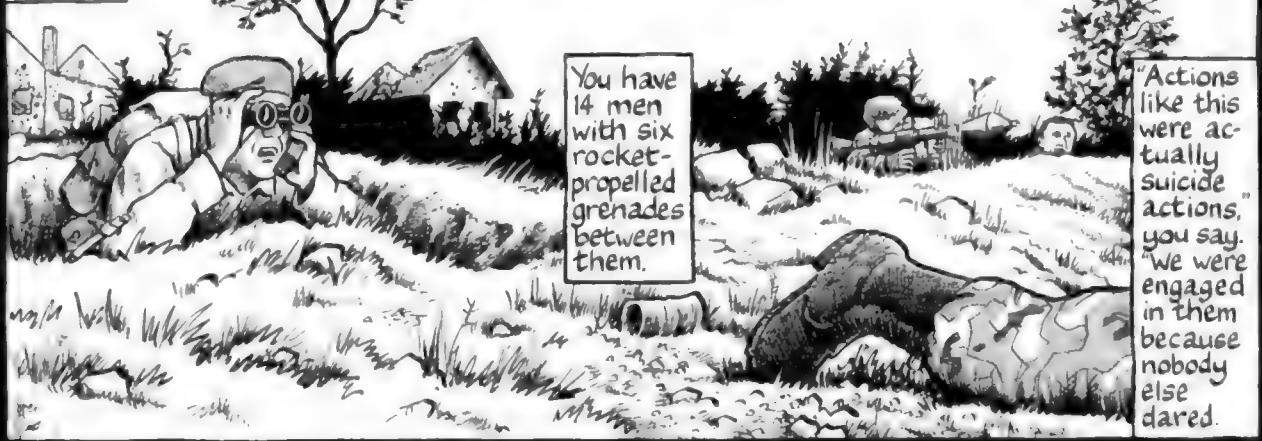


Near Stup,  
a western  
suburb of  
Sarajevo.



Two brigades  
you say,  
melted away  
before the  
approaching  
armor.

You have  
to plug  
the hole



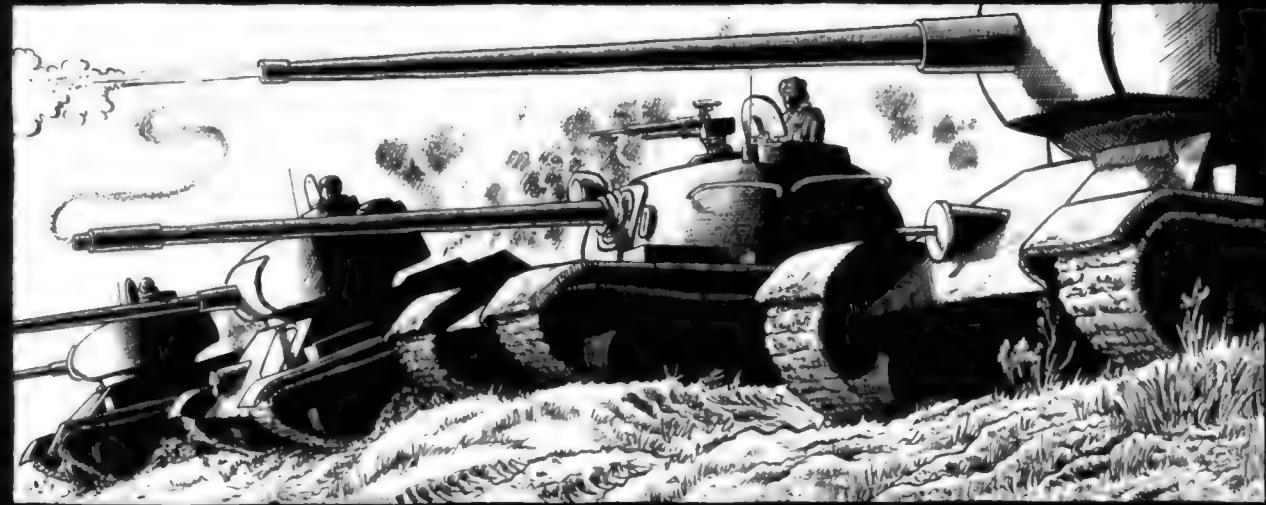
You have  
14 men  
with six  
rocket-  
propelled  
grenades  
between  
them.

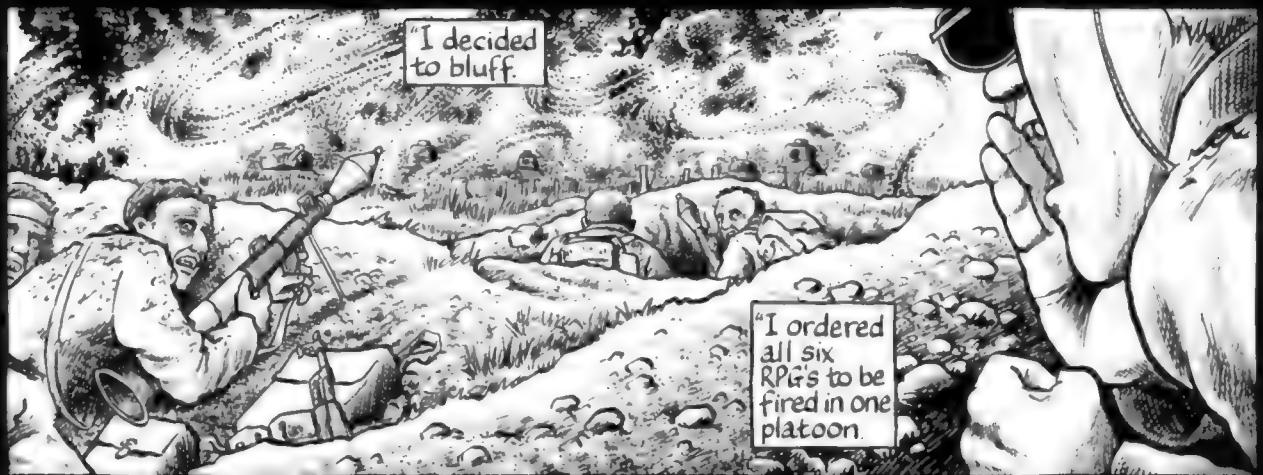
"Actions  
like this  
were ac-  
tually  
suicide  
actions,"  
you say.  
"We were  
engaged  
in them  
because  
nobody  
else  
dared.

"We were  
lucky..."



"Most of  
those  
tanks  
were T-34's  
and T-55's."





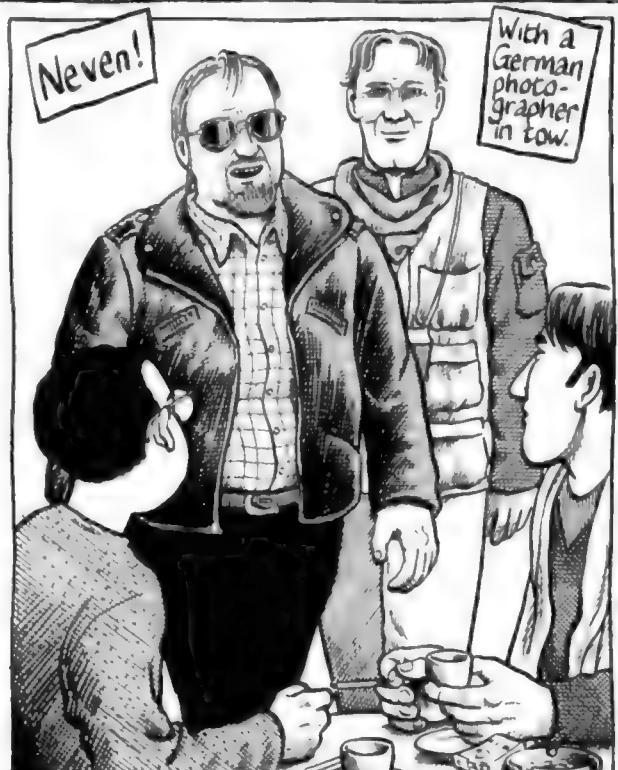
"Three of our guys were killed, and each of us was wounded.

"When that action was over we couldn't withdraw because the body of one of my friends was in our front lines, and we had standing orders from Celo that all of us are coming back, dead or alive.

"And that cult of Celo is based on the fact that he's a cruel son of a bitch, which is completely untrue. Because I saw him crying when Slaven was killed.

"He was our favorite kid."

CAN WE TAKE A SHORT BREAK?



And remember what I told you about my bottomless debt to Neven? Well, I've scaled back my sense of bottomless. I haven't presented Neven with a new position paper. I've simply avoided his haunts.

WHAT'S THE MAGA-ZINE?

THE WORK WE DID TO-GETHER.

HE BROUGHT IT FOR ME.

It's a photo essay titled 'Nightlife in Sarajevo.'

There's a picture of a dogfight...

THAT'S CRUEL.

WHY?

a prostitute, her tits and bush on full display...

HOW DID YOU GET THIS PICTURE?

NEVEN ARRANGED IT.

DID YOU PAY FOR IT?

YES...

I KNOW IT'S NOT THE BEST WAY...

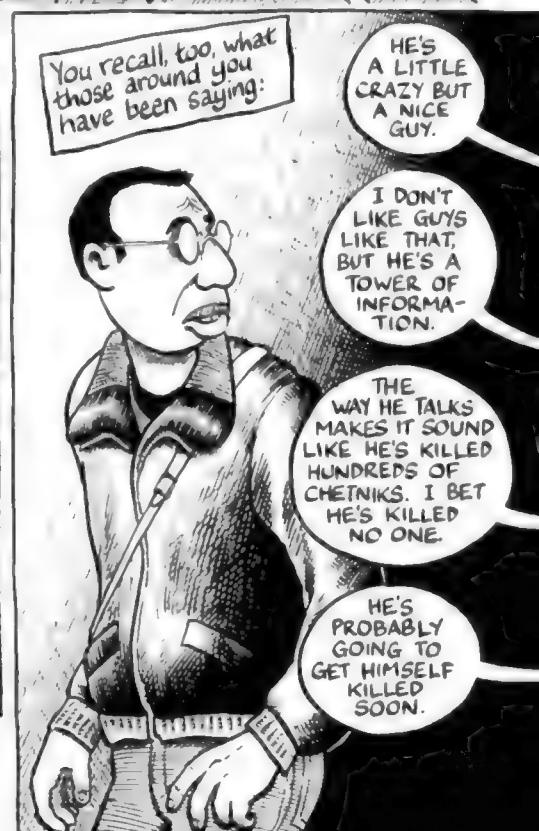
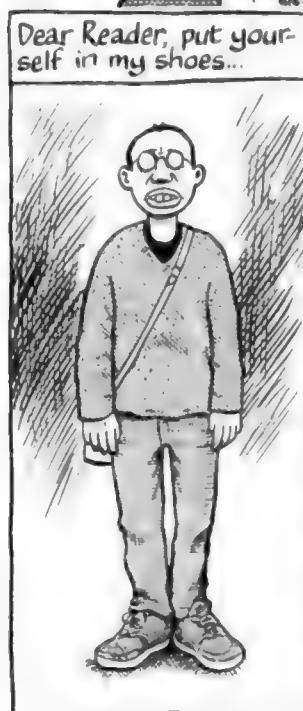
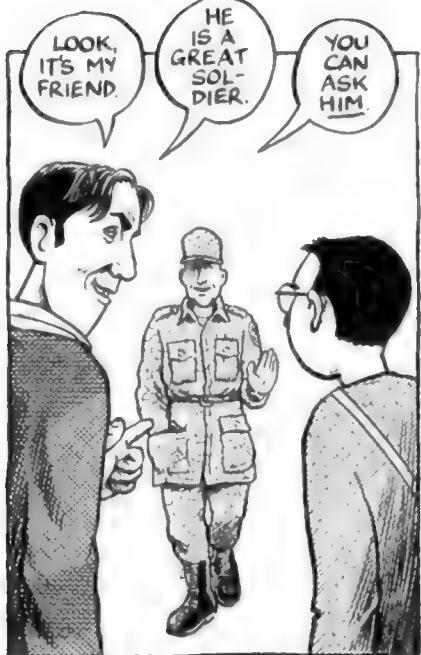
I'M NOT SAYING ANYTHING.

FOR HER IT WAS ANOTHER JOB.

AND WE COULD HAVE FUCKED HER, TOO, SINCE WE PAID FOR IT.

I HAVE TO GO.





1992-93

Put your-  
self in  
Neven's  
boots.

Mean-  
while,  
in town

There were a lot of people who didn't want to join the army, which is fine by me because you can't use people like that in a real action... But while we were fighting, they were sitting in their warm houses..."

IF  
THEY  
WERE NOT  
READY TO  
FIGHT, THEY  
SHOULD HAVE  
BEEN READY  
TO DIG  
TRENCHES AT  
LEAST.

"If someone had to dig, it was much easier from a commander's point of view to sacrifice civilians than soldiers.



"Everybody should take some risk"

HOW  
WOULD  
YOU DE-  
CIDE WHO  
WOULD  
DIG  
TRENCHES?

IT WAS  
RATHER  
ARBITRARY.  
I WOULD  
SAY.

"I would go into a coffee bar, order myself a coffee or whisky...

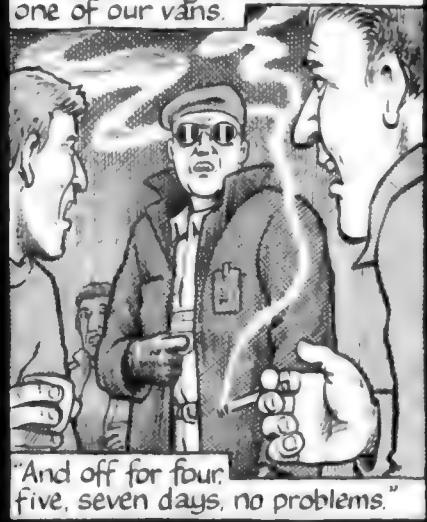


"Then I would tell the bar owner—

STOP  
THE  
MUSIC.



— and I would order every male in the bar to get out and enter one of our vans.



NOW,  
WHEN  
THEY'RE  
DOING IT  
OFFICIALLY, THEY  
TAKE PEOPLE  
FOR 21 DAYS.  
IN ONE  
SHIFT.

WERE  
THESE MEN  
ALLOWED  
TO NOTIFY  
THEIR FAM-  
ILIES?

"If they had a chance to notify their families — Everyone has somebody well connected, and then we would receive an official order that we can't take this guy.



"Our approach to the problem was a rather democratic one."

Shirkers of military service are not the only ones conscripted by groups like Caco's for trench digging duty. Intellectuals and artists are taken, too. One soldier enjoys telling me how he had personally rounded up a well known theater director for Caco's 'Dig For Victory' campaign.



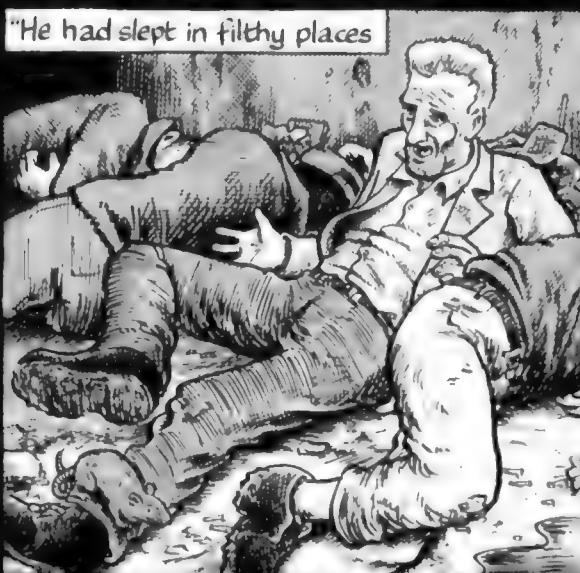
In fact, any man out of uniform might find himself plucked for this service.

I meet one young woman whose father simply disappeared one day. Not her mother nor anyone else knew where he was. The police couldn't or wouldn't help.

He turned up ten days later, swollen from beatings, shaking...



"He had lost ten kilos," she tells me. "He had been accused of something, and Juka's men had taken him to dig trenches."



I meet her father several times. I'm told he was different before... talkative... lively...



He is a Serb, and his victimization epitomized the fraying of Sarajevo's civil, ethnically tolerant society.



As shells and bullets wiped out scores of Sarajevoans, who would care much about a disappeared Serb?

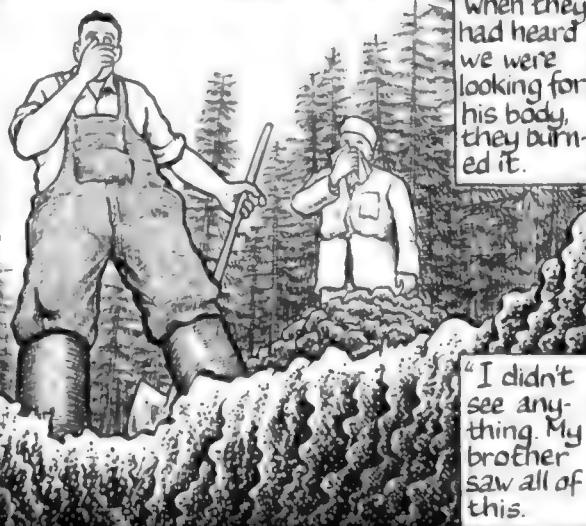
In 2001 I meet a Muslim woman named Behireta Sljivic. In June 1992 her Serb husband, who was active in the defense against the Serb nationalists, went missing.



"—and they took him anyway.

"We were sure it was him.

"After five days we found my husband's body... above Sarajevo, in an area protected by Caco's troops.

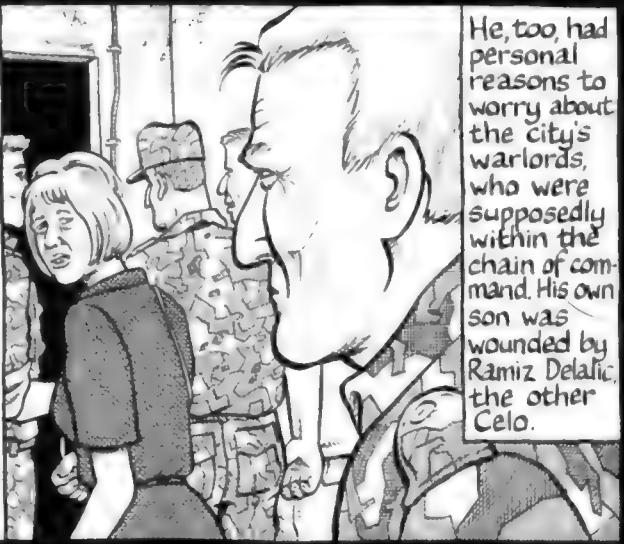


"And in our apartment... Caco put his girlfriend."





Slijivic had turned to Colonel Divjak for help in finding her husband. Divjak, who had already warned President Izetbegovic about mafia-like activity in Sarajevo, was the highest ranking Serb in the Bosnian army.



## The Strange Case of Juka Prazina

The marriage made out of necessity between the Bosnian government and the strongmen is straining. Soon it reaches a major crisis.

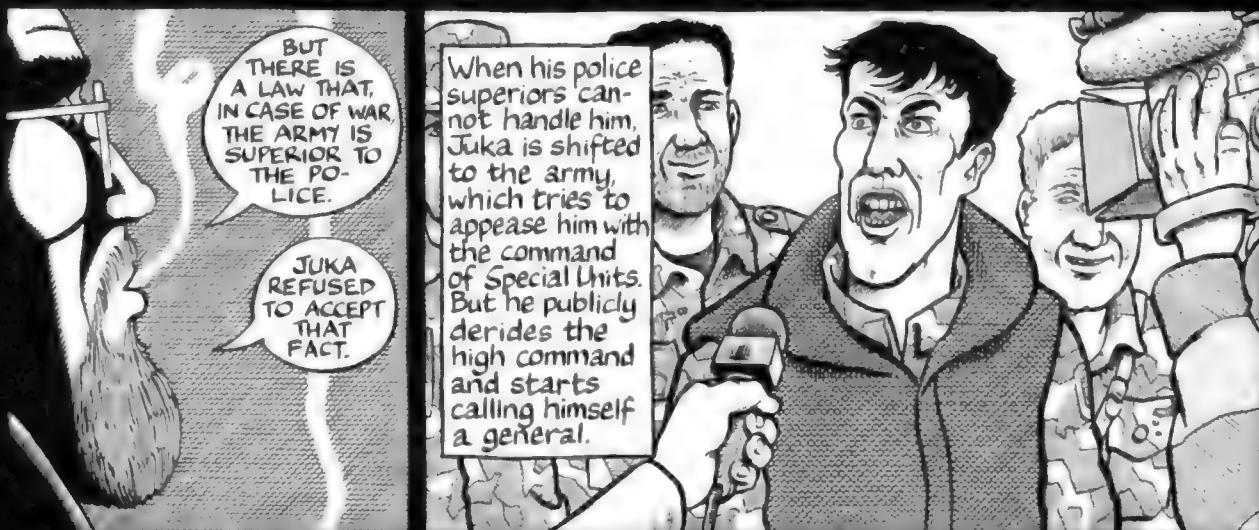


Juka's personal heroics and T.V. appearances have transformed the one-time petty crook into an icon. Juka is highly regarded, even by educated Sarajevans, because "the fact that someone — anyone — would have the guts to stand up and fight was really appreciated," according to Vildana Selimbegovic, a journalist for "Dani."



The government cannot ignore Juka and his 3,000 well armed men... It names him commander of a reserve special police force.

The government also allows Juka to sit in on cabinet meetings... He clashes with General Sefer Halilovic, Bosnia's senior army officer



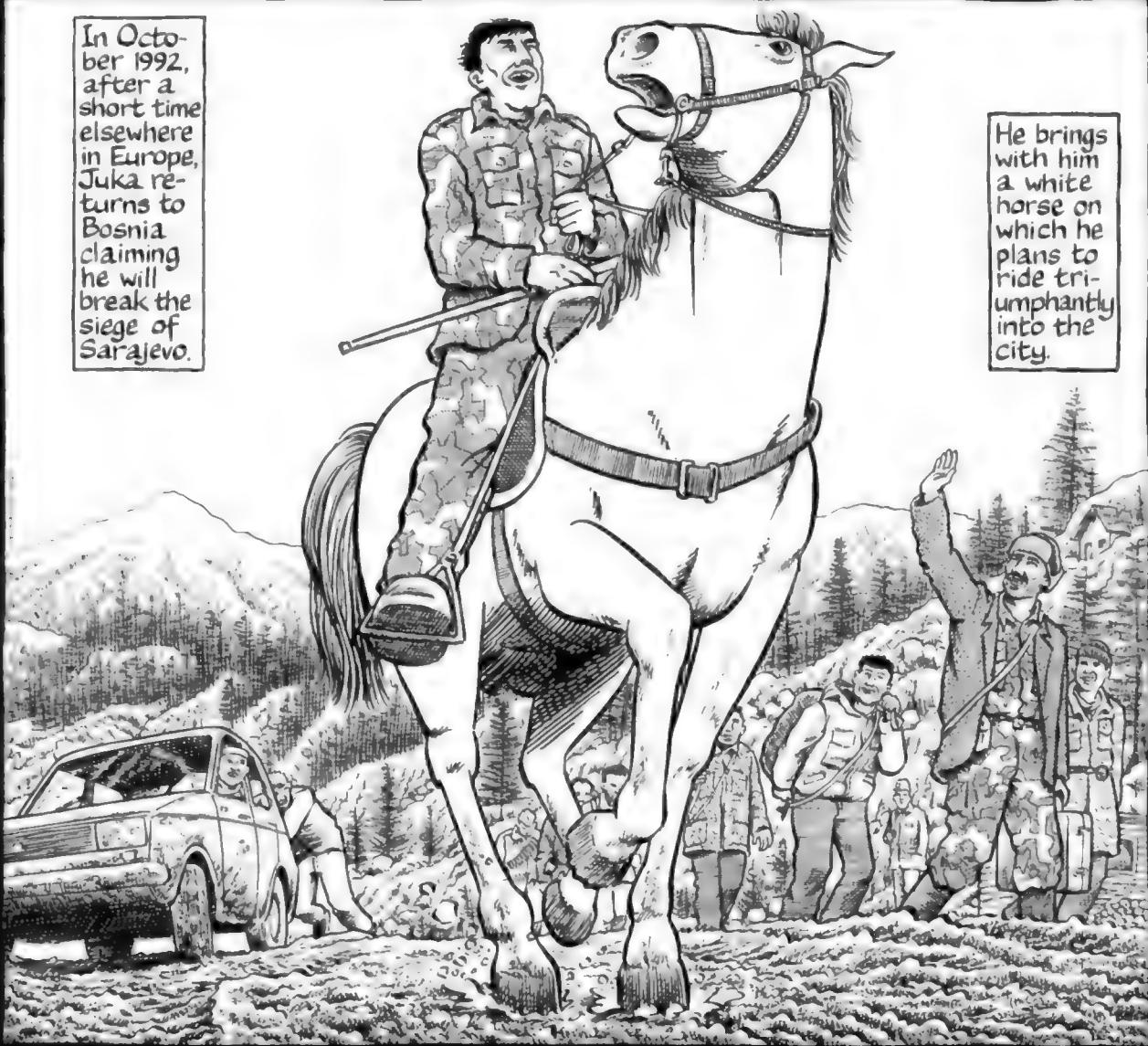
When his wife is badly wounded, Juka is put on a U.N. flight with her out of Sarajevo.



THE IDEA WAS TO REMOVE HIM FROM SARAJEVO BECAUSE HE WAS AT ODDS WITH EVERY OTHER COMMANDER.

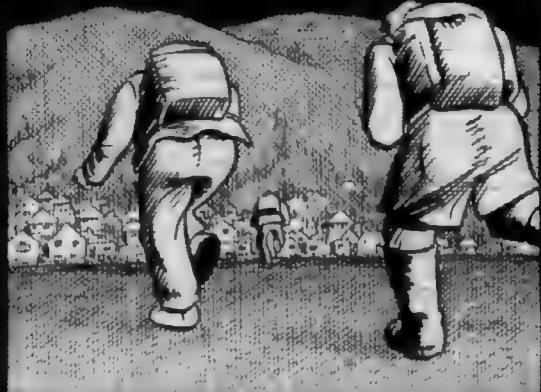
AND IT WAS BETTER TO SEND HIM SOMEWHERE WHERE THERE WERE FEWER COMMANDERS AND FEWER EGOS.

In October 1992, after a short time elsewhere in Europe, Juka returns to Bosnia claiming he will break the siege of Sarajevo.



He brings with him a white horse on which he plans to ride triumphantly into the city.

The only overland way out of Sarajevo is to run over the U.N.-controlled runway, which is under Serb guns, and reach Mt. Igman, the gateway to "free" Bosnia.



Juka all but seizes the base on Igman from his own army, beating up some of the officers stationed there.



With several score hard-core followers, Juka now controls the route out of Sarajevo

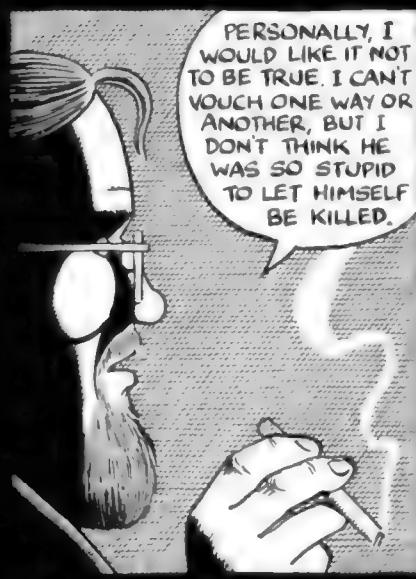


In a brief military action in early 1993, the Bosnian army manages to arrest many of his supporters. Juka is forced off the mountain.



In the war within a war that erupts between the Bosnian Croats and Bosnian government in 1993, Juka's shrinking gang reportedly aids in the cleansing of Muslims from Mostar.

Shortly thereafter, Juka leaves the Balkans. In December 1993, hitchhikers find his body at a rest stop near Liege, Belgium.



1995

...THE  
SARAJEVAN  
WAY OF LIVING  
CANNOT BE  
CHANGED, WAR  
NOT WITH-  
STANDING.

EVEN  
IF WE ARE  
ABROAD, WE  
STILL THINK  
THE SAME  
WAY.

THAT'S  
OUR MARK  
—THE MARK  
OF A SARA-  
JEVAN.

IT'S A  
MIXTURE  
OF SO MANY  
THINGS:

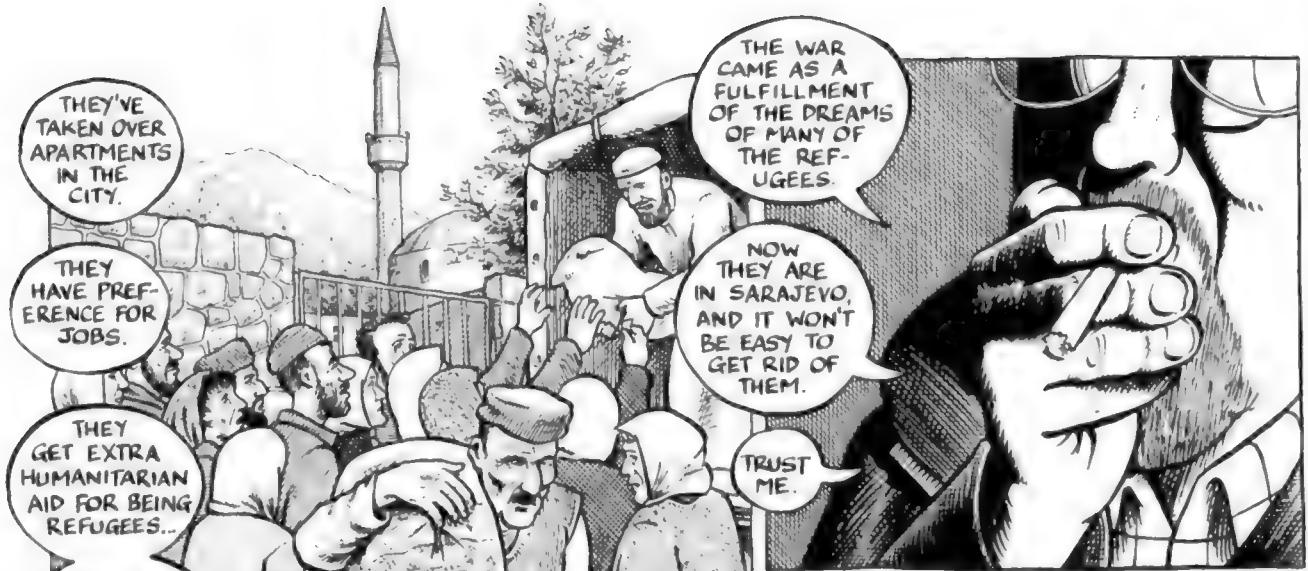
A LOVE  
OF ART,  
A LOVE OF  
OTHER PEOPLE;

AND  
AN AMOUNT  
OF SAR-  
CASM AND  
IRONY.

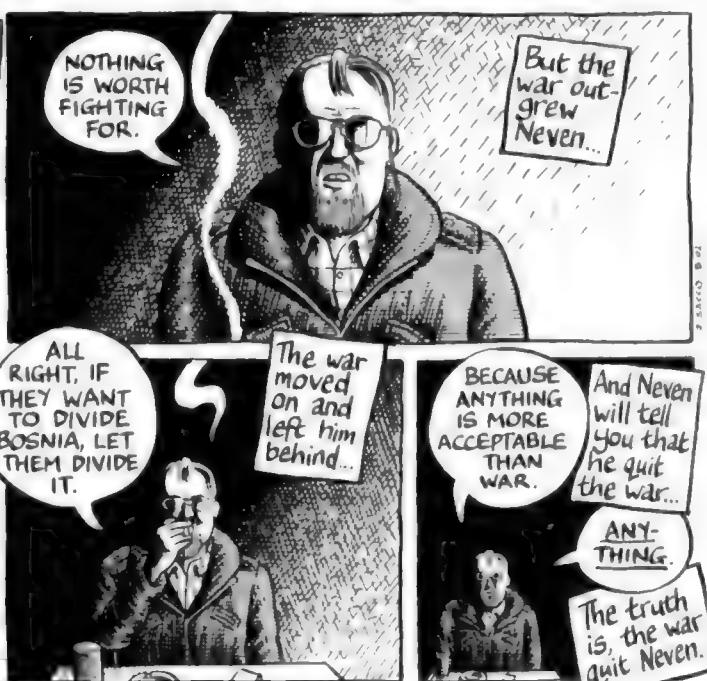
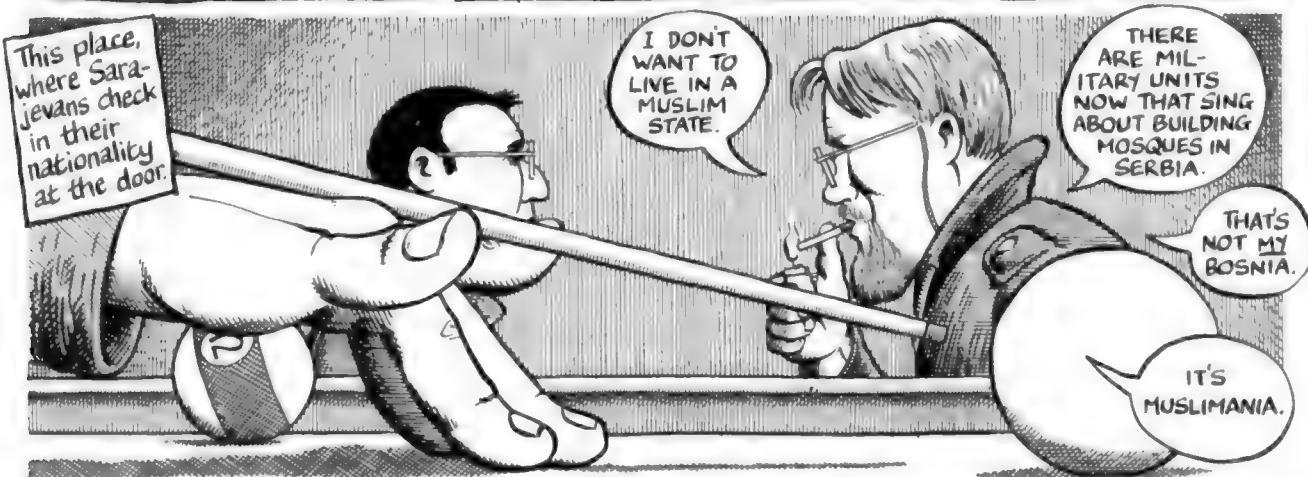
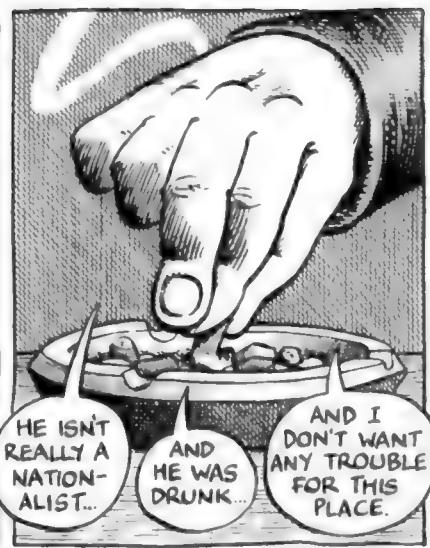
THIS  
IS THE  
KIND OF PLACE  
WHERE REAL  
SARAJEVANS  
ARE COM-  
ING.











# 1993

"He could have told me, 'Listen, you mother-fucker, you're not in this unit anymore. But he chose to tell me in a very nice manner. We were talking face-to-face because we were friends.'

"Celo told me - how should I put it? - that I'm too hot-blooded. He told me I was taking unnecessary risks, ... rushing into actions without thinking."



AND HE  
TOLD ME  
SOMETHING  
THAT REALLY  
HURT ME.

"He said I was costing him two people. He said he needed somebody... to shoot me in case I go on the other side."

IN CASE  
YOU  
DESERTED?  
BECAUSE  
YOU'RE A  
SERB?

YEAH!

"And he had to have a guy covering my back - in case somebody tried to kill me on this side. At that time some Serbs were simply disappearing from their apartments or they were found dead."

AND I  
WAS TELLING  
EVERYONE  
LOUDLY THAT  
I AM A  
SERB.

"I never allowed people to mention that Serbs are shooting on Sarajevo. I was always insisting that Chetniks are shooting on Sarajevo. Because I couldn't fight against Serbs. I can fight against Chetniks."

"He told me I couldn't be in the active unit. I could be on the operational staff."



Put yourself in Neven's shoes. You have health problems. You've been wounded three times. Legally you can have yourself demobilized. So you do.



"I thought I'd done enough. I did more than some people who were fitter than I am so why the hell would I play the fool anymore?"

"I started working for foreign journalists."



Meanwhile, the Bosnian government is increasingly at a loss as to how to deal with its ill-disciplined military units. For his part, President Izetbegovic seems to tolerate the excesses of commanders like Delalic and Caco.



Delalic will later say, "He always had time for us. Sometimes he would scold us severely. We were like children to him; he would scold and praise us."

According to Divjak, by this time a general, "Izetbegovic believed more in them than in the official commanders of the army of Bosnia."



(In fact, Delalic and Caco were official commanders, technically answerable to the government.)

Put yourself in Izetbegovic's shoes. Although newly trained army units are shouldering more of the burden, the brigades commanded by Caco and Delalic are still vital to the defense of Sarajevo.



The government continues to make efforts to integrate all brigades properly into the chain of command. Some of the smaller warlords acquiesce.



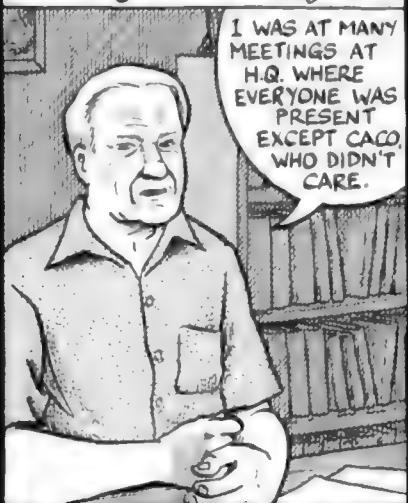
But Delalic, who previously accepted the officers the high command sent to his 9th Motarized Brigade—including a commander superior to himself—now chases them away.



Caco ignores the army reorganization entirely.



According to General Divjak—



The government turns its attention to Ismet Bajramovic—Celo—whose unit it declares a rogue.



"On the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, '93, there was a special show on television ... and the president himself said certain elements of the military police commanded by Celo were not really soldiers,



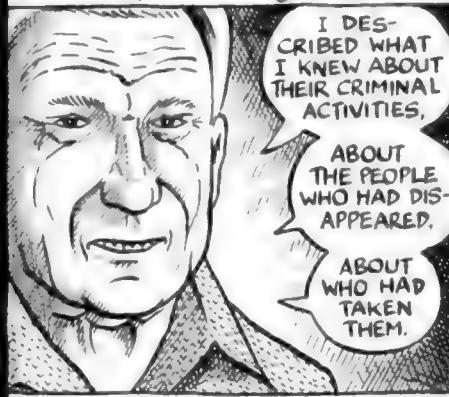
"We were stunned by it. How else can you feel when you've lost so many friends and someone is saying you were not a soldier but a fucking criminal?



Celo's unit is disbanded, its men dispersed into other units. Celo, who the war has made rich, opens up a nightclub.

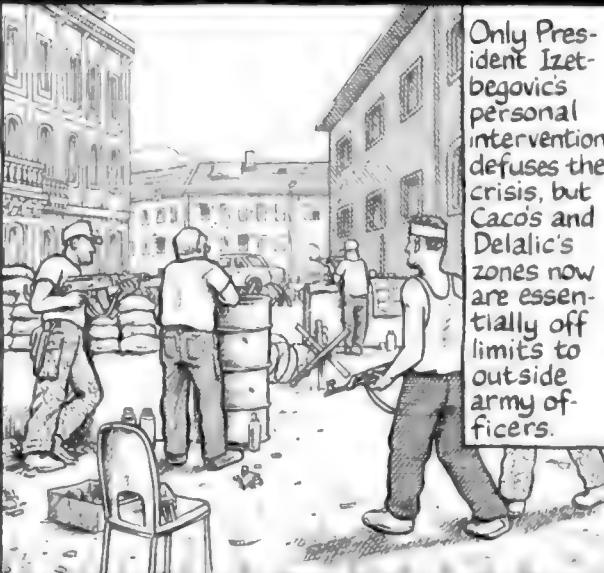


Meanwhile, damning evidence is mounting against the other warlords. In May, General Divjak sends a letter to President Izetbegovic with detailed charges—including accusations of murder of citizens, particularly Serbs.



But Izetbegovic won't upset his accommodation with the strongest of the strongmen until they threaten his authority or undermine the state.

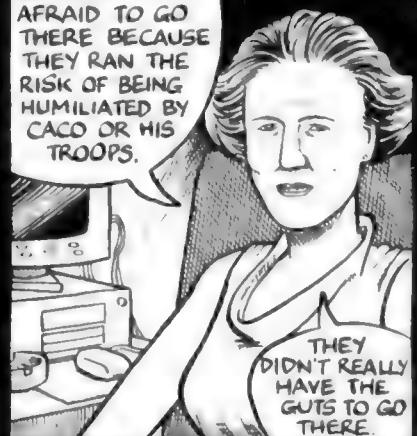
That moment seems to come in July when the government arrests Caco's chief of staff, who is sometimes blamed for certain excesses attributed to Caco. In response, Caco throws up barricades and takes hostages. Delalic lines up behind him. The stage is set for a confrontation between the government and two of its most powerful brigade commanders.



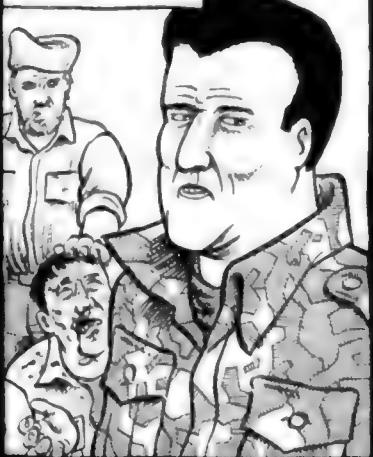
Only President Izetbegovic's personal intervention defuses the crisis, but Caco's and Delalic's zones now are essentially off limits to outside army officers.

According to 'Dani' journalist Vildana Selimbegovic-

THE HIGHER ECHELON WAS AFRAID TO GO THERE BECAUSE THEY RAN THE RISK OF BEING HUMILIATED BY CACO OR HIS TROOPS.



Caco in particular puts himself further and further above the law.



"He was shooting a nitroglycerin gun. The gun malfunctioned, and the explosion took off three of his fingers



"You can imagine what that means to a guitar player."



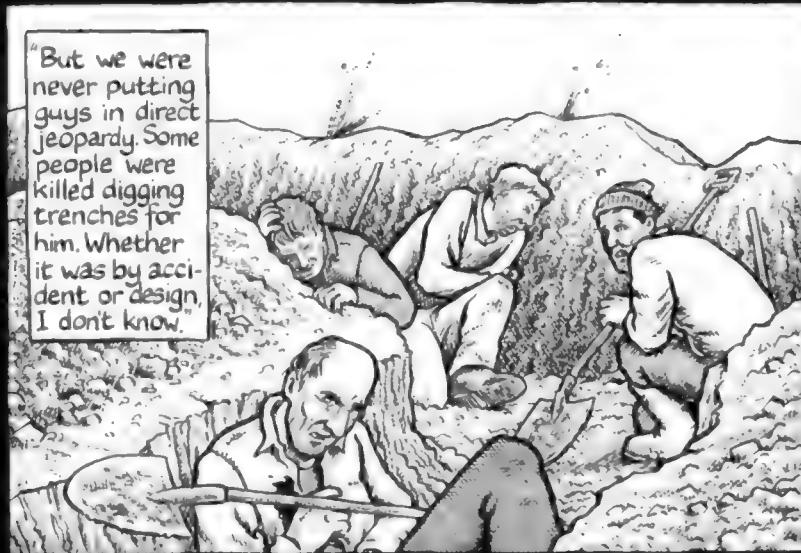
"He changed. That's beyond question... That must have affected his command abilities."



"Music was his whole life."



"But we were never putting guys in direct jeopardy. Some people were killed digging trenches for him. Whether it was by accident or design, I don't know."



And, increasingly, Sarajevans are whispering about horrible things said to be happening in Caco's area in a place called Kazani.



Government relations with Delalic haven't floundered entirely. In September, at the request of the high command, he sends some of his forces out of Sarajevo to aid troops fighting the Croats. (His soldiers are later implicated in a massacre of civilians in Grabovica.)

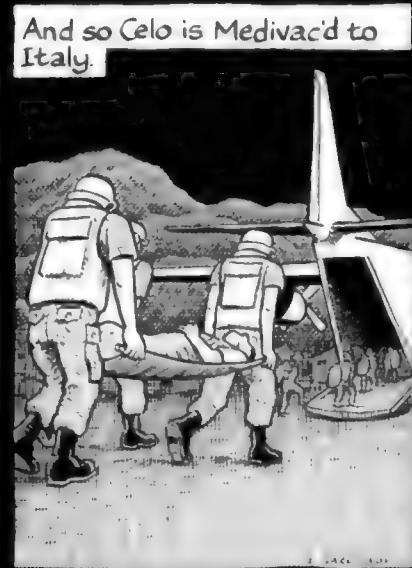
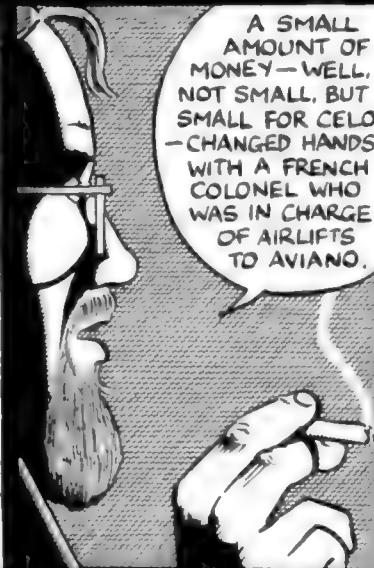
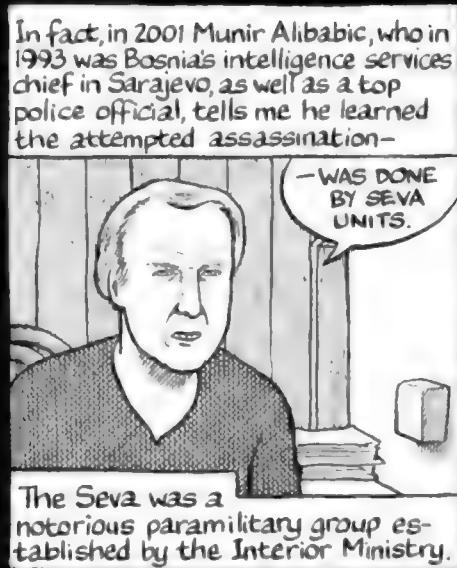
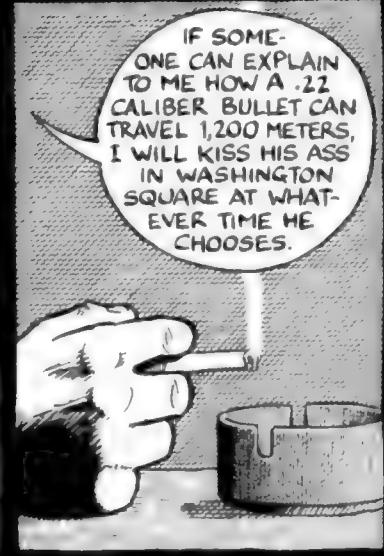
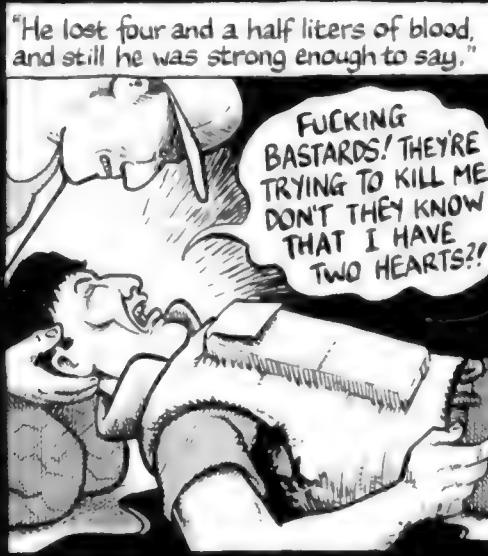
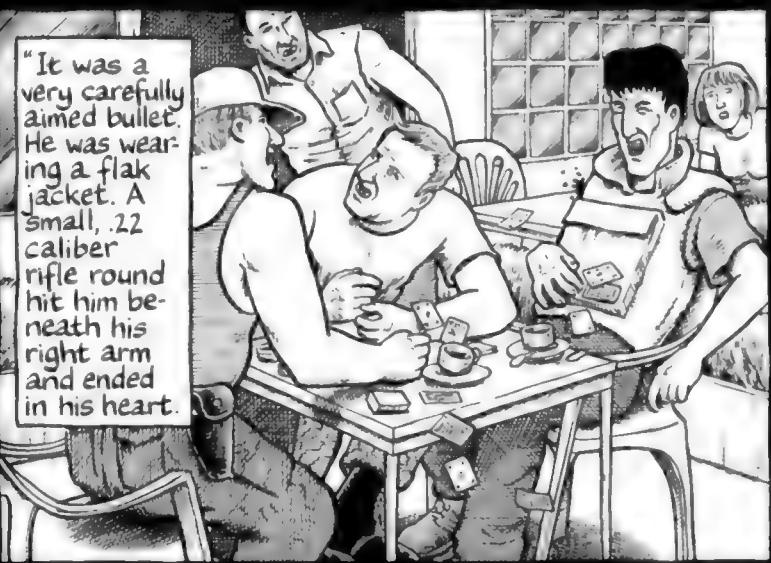
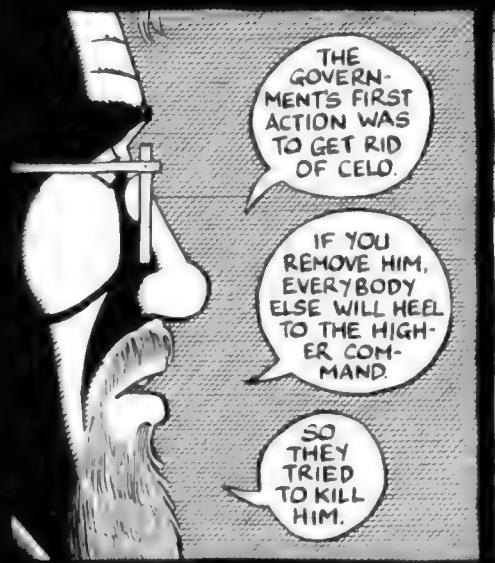


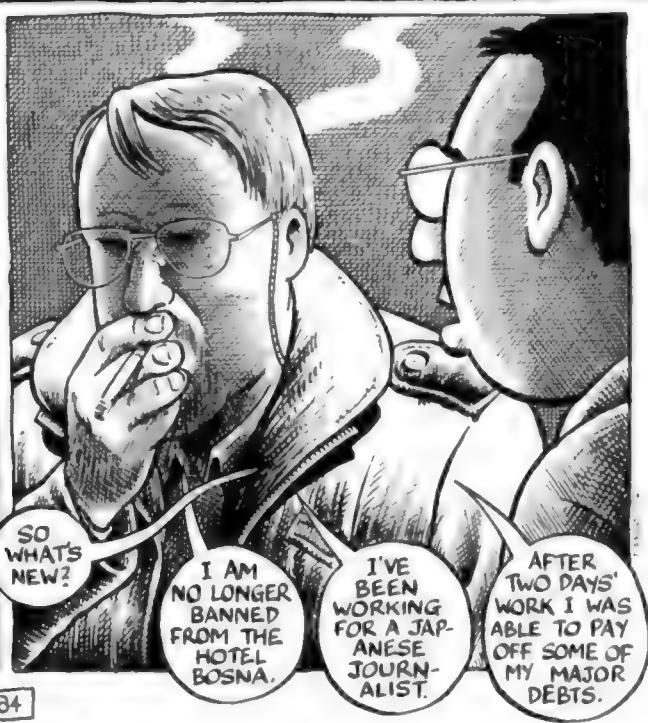
But the July barricades make clear that the one-time heroes of Sarajevo are all but beyond redemption. They have undermined the government's authority at home and embarrassed it abroad.

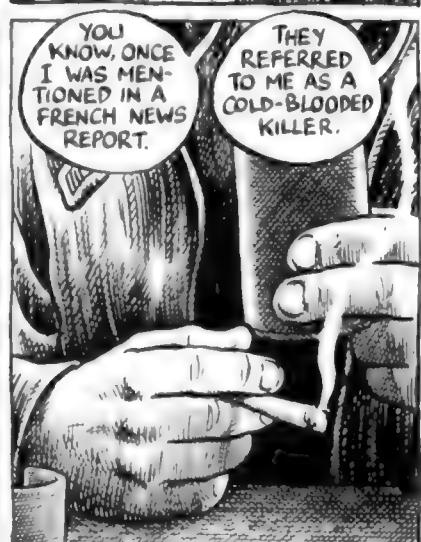
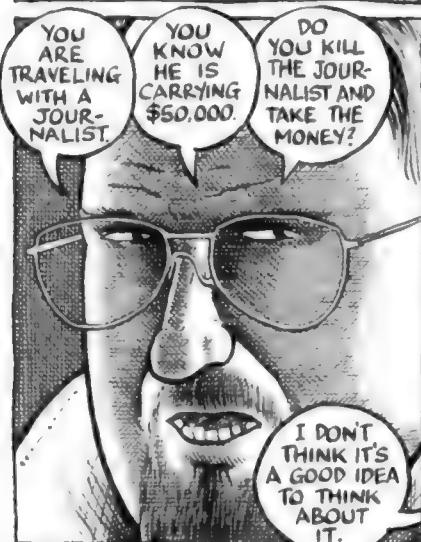


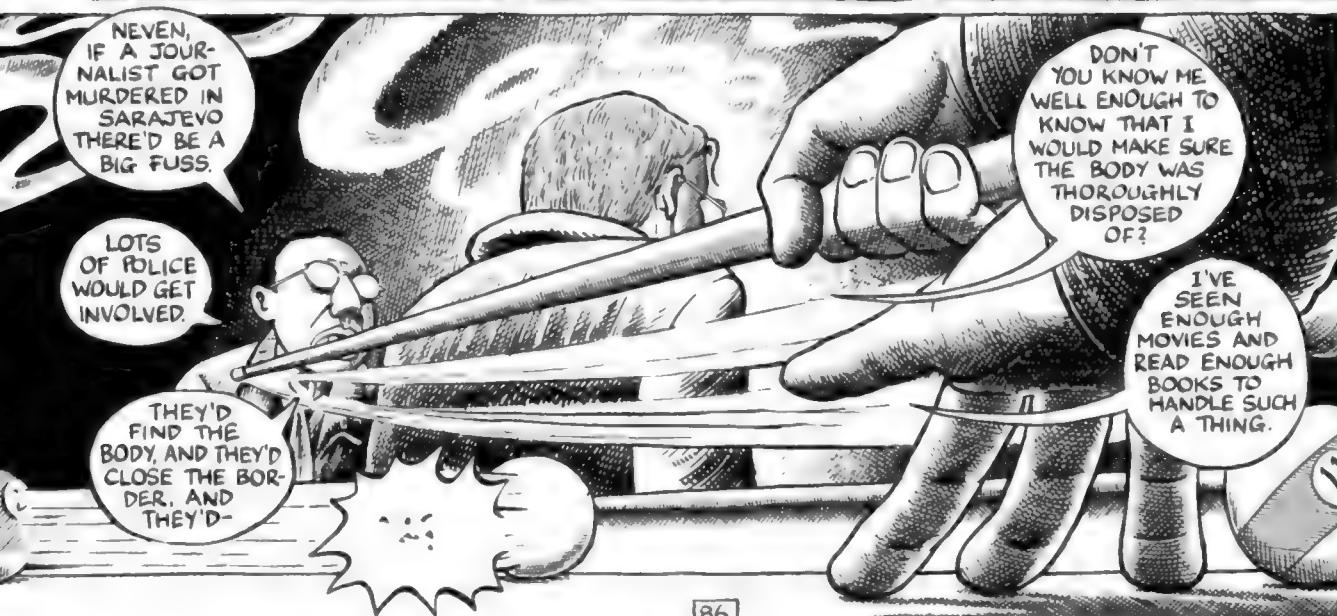
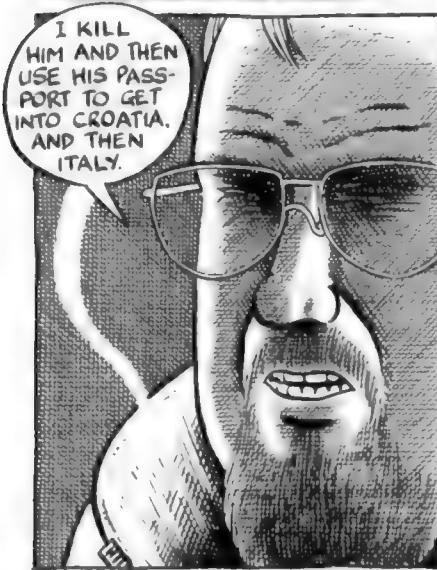
Since the beginning of the war, the government has managed to build up military units loyal to itself, and plans are underfoot to settle the question of the war lords once and for all.













# Oct. 26, 1993

The government's showdown with Ramiz 'Celo' Delalic and Musan 'Caco' Topalovic is one of the most controversial incidents in Sarajevo's war. Its details are still hotly disputed.

According to Alibabic, the intelligence boss and police chief at the time, "A plan was put together to get rid of the criminal individuals..."

I PARTICIPATED IN THE PLAN, WHICH INVOLVED A COMBINATION OF MILITARY FORCES AND POLICE OFFICERS.

THE PLAN WAS TO BESIEGE THEM, TO MAKE THE NOOSE TIGHTER, AND THEN TO ARREST THEM.

When he sees his headquarters has been surrounded by soldiers and police, Delalic takes hostages.

After a brief firefight and a call to President Izetbegovic, however, he gives himself up

But in the operation against Caco's brigade, things go wrong. According to Alibabic, nine policemen are sent in to arrest Caco before the original plan can unfold.

THEY WERE CAPTURED AND LATER MUTILATED, THOSE NINE PEOPLE.

According to journalist Selimbegovic—



Neven has his own version—



"And mind you, they sent two Serbs and one Muslim to negotiate with Caco. And then somebody called Zoran on his radio by his name, not by his code..."

"And when Caco heard that, he asked—"

"WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING HERE? I AM FIGHTING AGAINST CHETNIKS AND THEY SEND CHETNIKS TO ARREST ME!"

(Zoran is a Serb first name.)

"And then he snapped.

"He killed Zoran with a knife."



"He threw Amir through a window."



"And he shot Srdjan."



I'M  
TELLING  
YOU HOW IT  
WAS.

FOR  
SURE  
THIS IS  
FROM A  
CERTIFIED  
SOURCE

Caco has seized hostages and threatens to kill them if the military and police don't lift their siege

Several hours later Caco is dead. Officially, he has been killed. trying to escape. But most Sarajevoans believe something else —



Finally, President Izetbegovic guarantees Caco fair treatment, and he surrenders.

They believe he was kicked to death by the father of one of the policemen he had killed.

Alibabic has his own theory—

HE WAS THE EXECUTOR AND WITNESS OF ATROCITIES AND KILLINGS. HE WAS IN THE CHAIN OF COMMAND AND HE NEEDED TO DISAPPEAR.

WITHOUT HIS DEATH THE ONES WHO KILLED HIM WOULD ALSO HAVE BEEN HELD RESPONSIBLE.

"He was killed because he was a dangerous witness for Izetbegovic."



Fourteen people were killed in the operations against Caco and Delalic. Almost 200 of their men were arrested.



The famed defenders of Sarajevo were finished.

1995-96

Whenever I see Neven now it's by chance

'I'M YOUR WORST NIGHT-MARE.'

He's doing well. He just worked two days with some more Japanese journalists who paid him \$300 a day, and then gave him a bonus.

I TRANSLATED MAYBE TWO OR THREE SENTENCES FOR THEM, THAT'S ALL.

CRAZY!

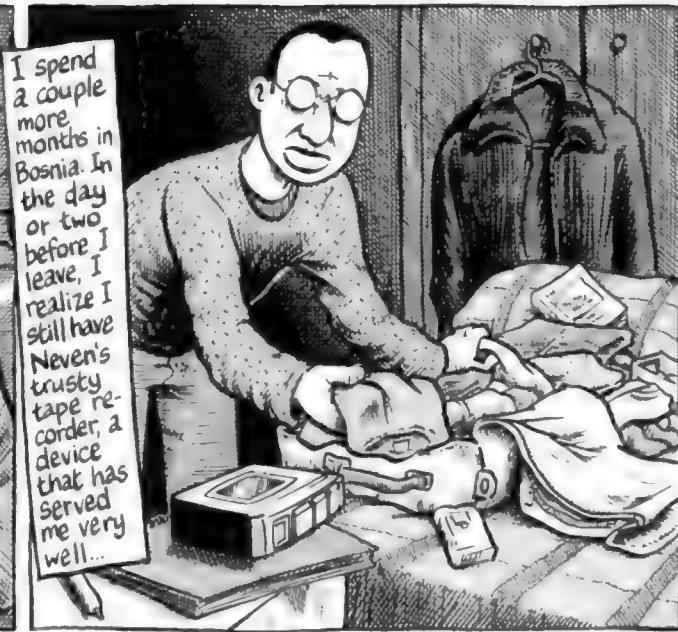
I BROUGHT MYSELF A NEW JACKET AND A WHOLE STOCK OF FOOD.

NOW I'M DOWN TO ONLY 30 MARKS.

Oops! I think I know where this conversation is heading...

Time for a pre-emptive strike!

I'M RUNNING OUT OF MONEY MYSELF.



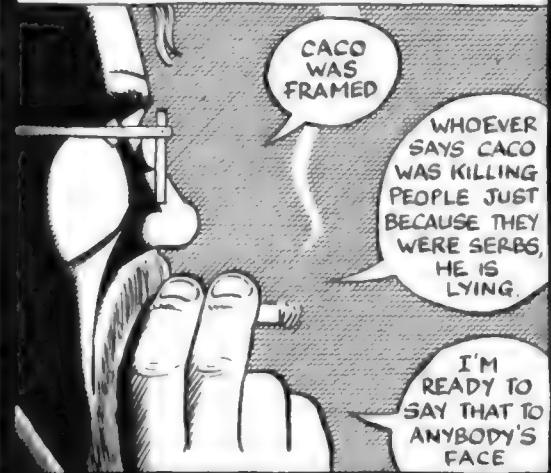
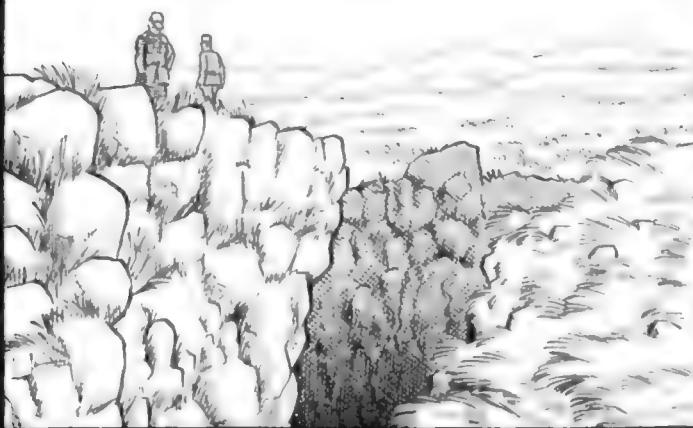
# 1993-2001

In the hours after his death, the government, which had long needed Caco and – many believed – was well aware of his crimes, washes its hands of him.

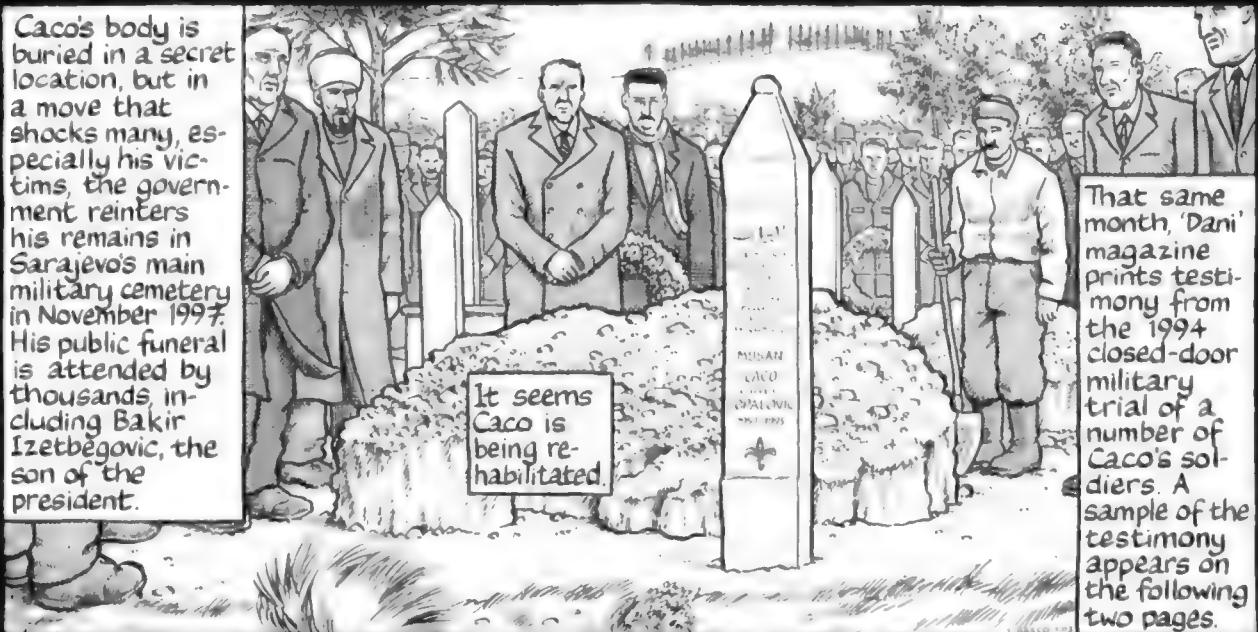
It heaps charges on his stiffening corpse: murder; rape; the kidnap of wealthy Sarajevans for ransom; blackmail; forcing civilians to dig trenches; and the seizure of U.N. vehicles.

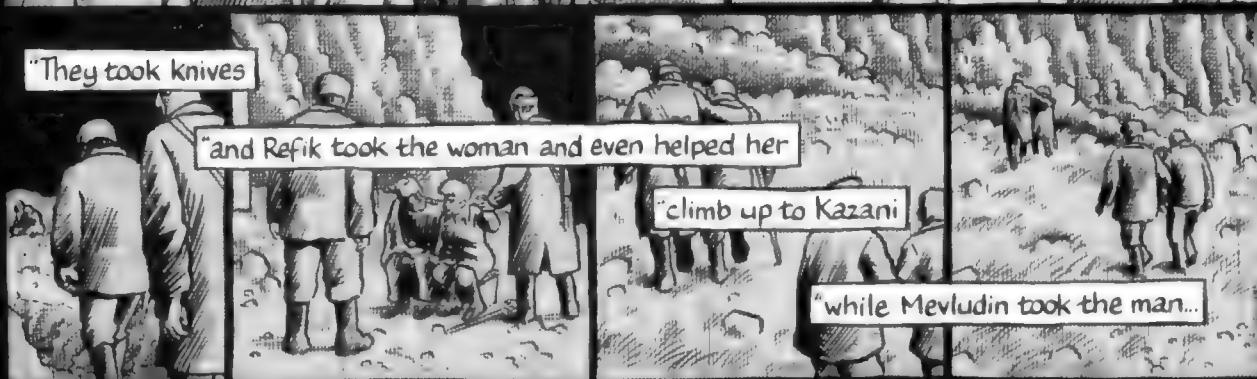
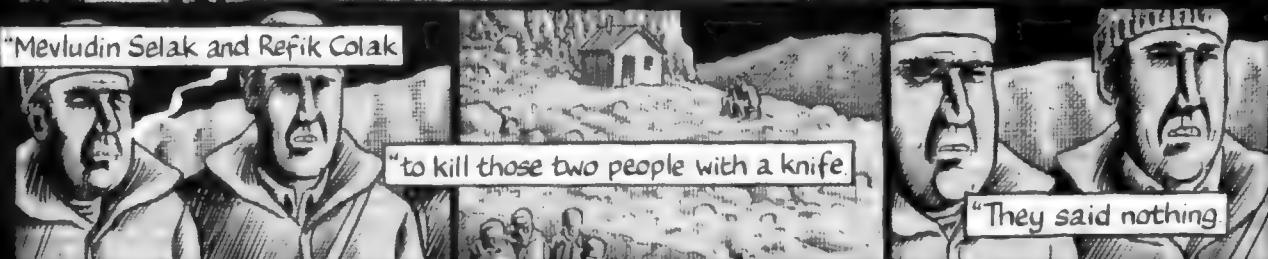
The government reveals it has found a secret burial ground, the Kazani pit, which had been in Caco's zone of control and where he is said to have dumped his victims, mainly Serb citizens of Sarajevo.

Many followers and admirers of Caco still do not believe that he had anything to do with the crimes attributed to him.



Caco's body is buried in a secret location, but in a move that shocks many, especially his victims, the government reinters his remains in Sarajevo's main military cemetery in November 1997. His public funeral is attended by thousands, including Bakir Izetbegovic, the son of the president.





"I don't know who threw the bodies into the depth



Testimony of Asif Alibasic

..I noticed Caco taking a knife from Armin Hodzic

"and stabbing Dusko Jovanovic.

"Next thing I saw was Caco giving Armin the knife and telling him

"to do the same,

"then he passed the knife to Ziga Sabahudin.

"etc.

"When it came to my turn

"I took the knife and stabbed him a few times

"but he was already dead.

Ergin Nikolic lay on the floor of the sod house.

"Caco dragged him out...

"Both of them were moved to the location of Kazani.

"Caco took the knife from Armin Hodzic

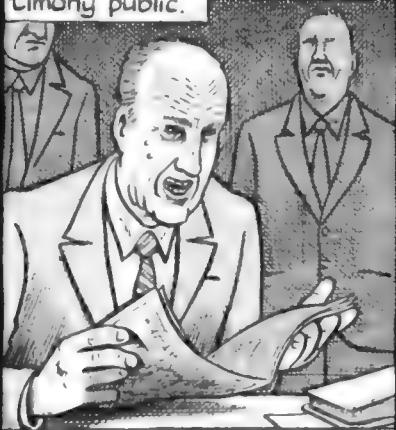
"but I didn't see what happened later

"I just saw that Samir Bejtic cut off Dusko Jovanovic's head

"and Caco kicked it into the depth..."

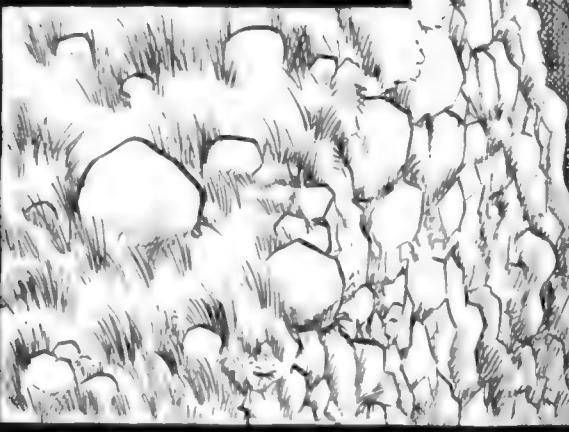
Testimony of Samir Seferovic

'Dani' is denounced by President Izetbegovic for making the testimony public.



He accuses the magazine's staff of betrayal and of 'being spies and Chetniks, according to 'Dani' editor Senad Pecanin.

The estimates of those killed by Sarajevo's warlords vary wildly. Bosnian Serb propagandists insist 10,000 Serbs were killed by Muslim-dominated forces in the capital. That figure is absurd.



As for justice, four of Cacos' men are found guilty of murder in the 1994 trial. None are given a sentence of more than six years.



Others are released from detention for time already served. A few are ordered to receive psychiatric treatment.

Regarding the number of victims, Pecanin has this to say:



As for those dumped in Kazani, former police official Alibabic says that as of 2001 a full accounting had not been made.



And the surviving warlords? Razim Delalic serves time in jail but is released early. He opens a bar, and participates in military actions in 1995.



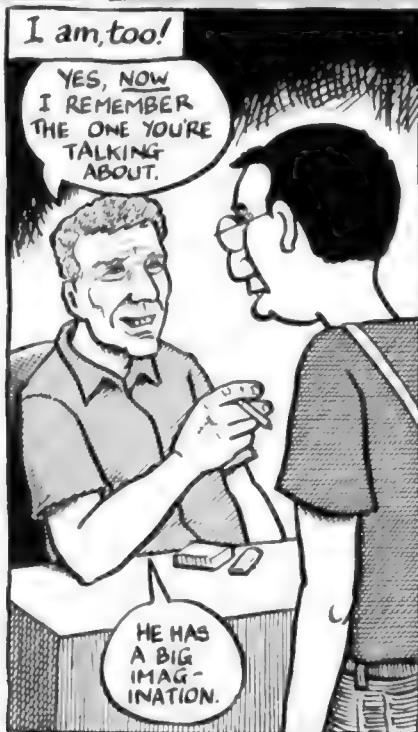
He is in and out of trouble with the law. In 2001 he is back in jail for assaulting a police officer.

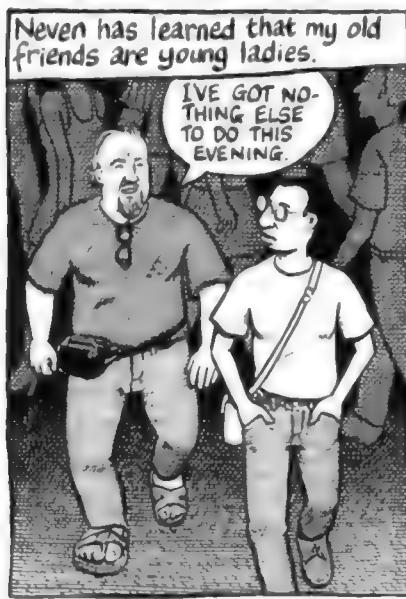
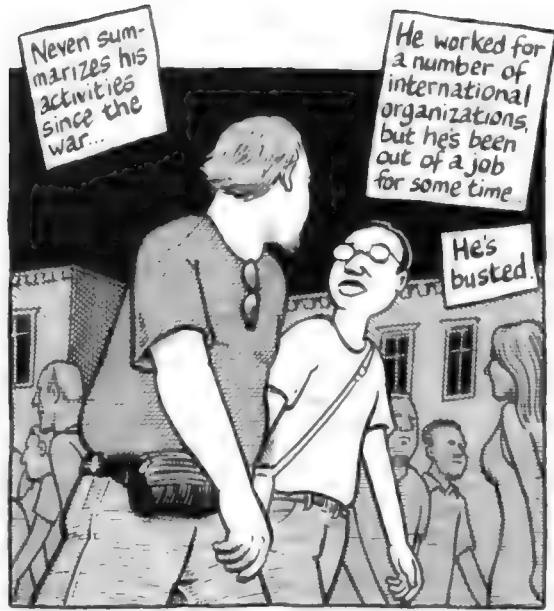
Ismet Bajramovic recovers from his wounds and returns to Bosnia after the war. He becomes a powerful underworld figure.

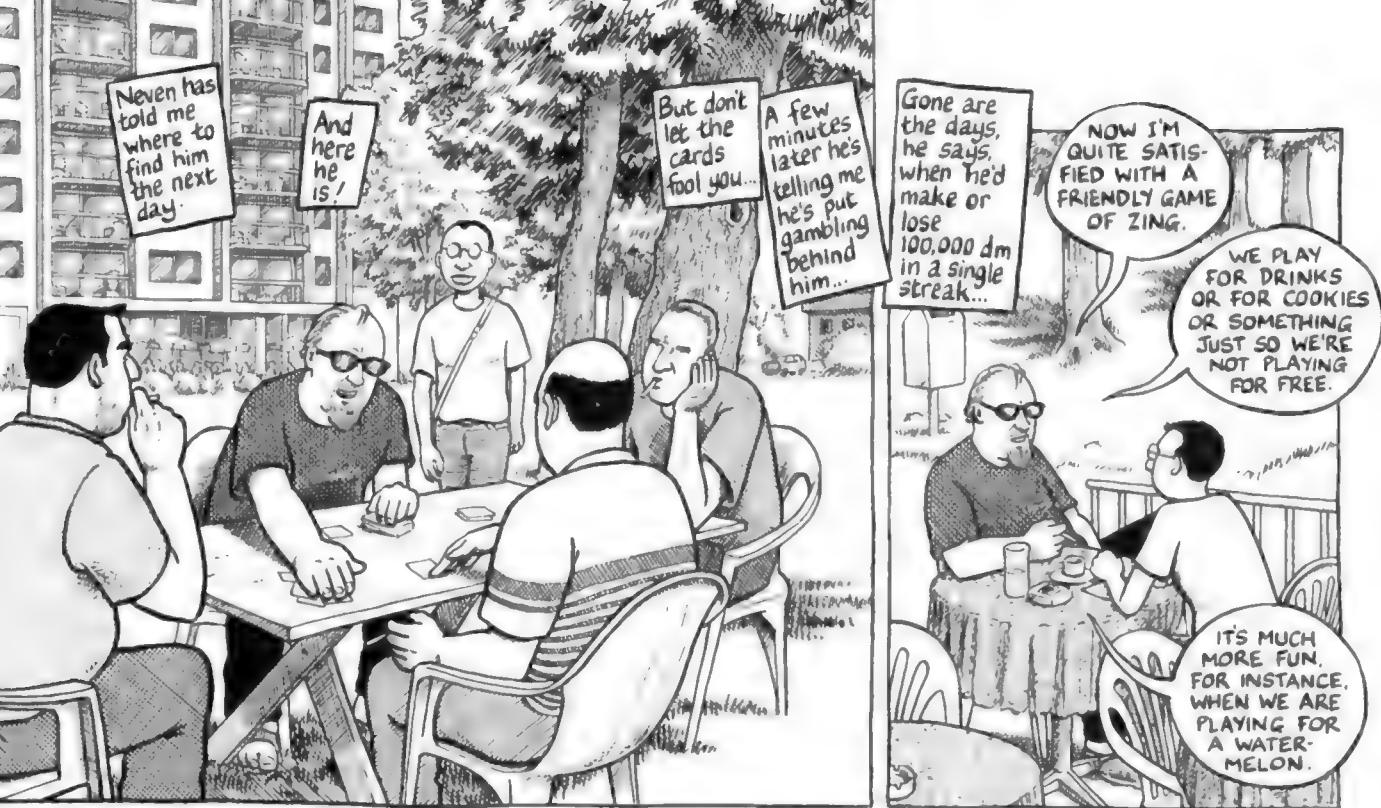


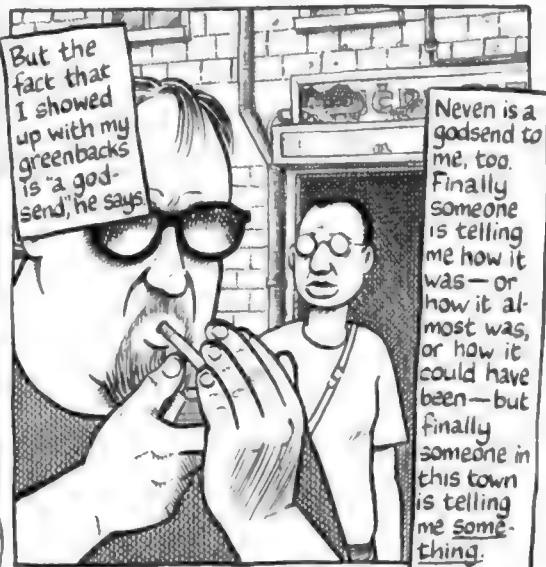
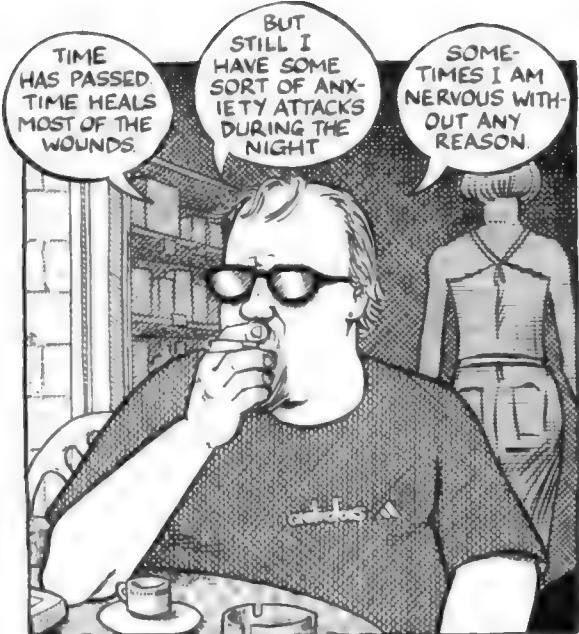
In 2001 he is in jail for murder.

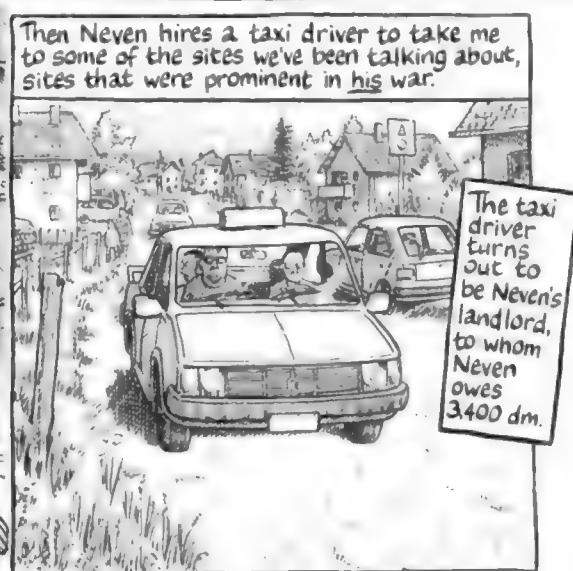
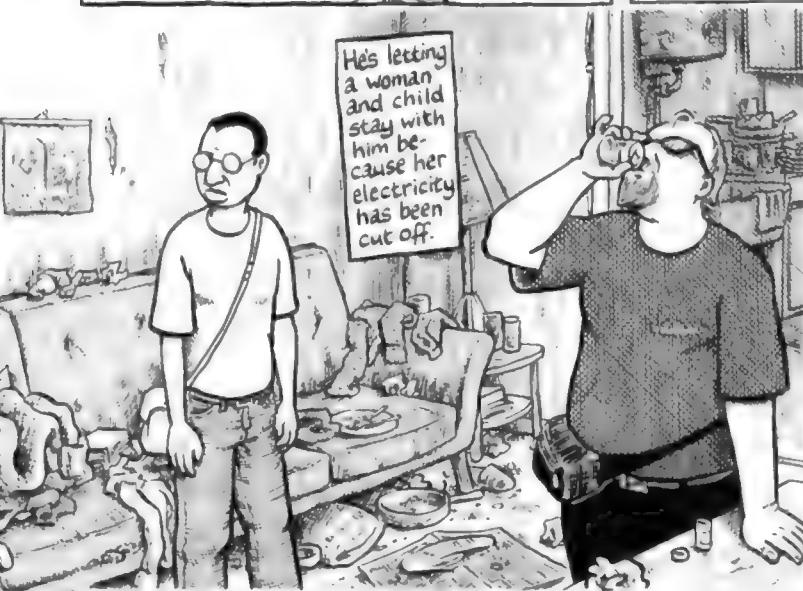
# EPilogue 2001





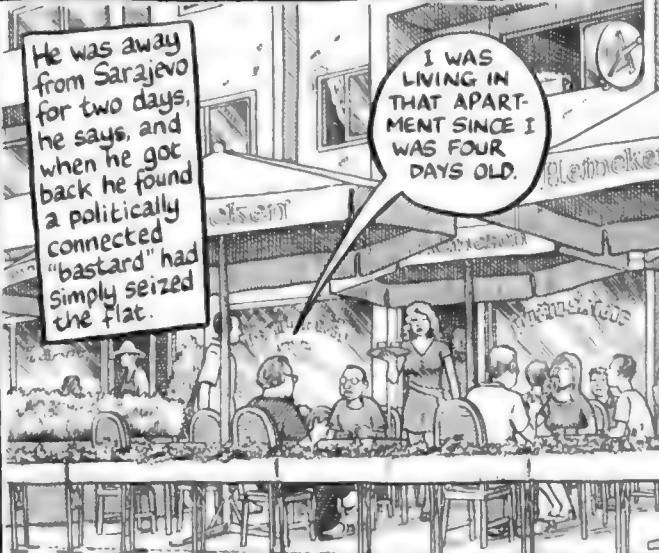
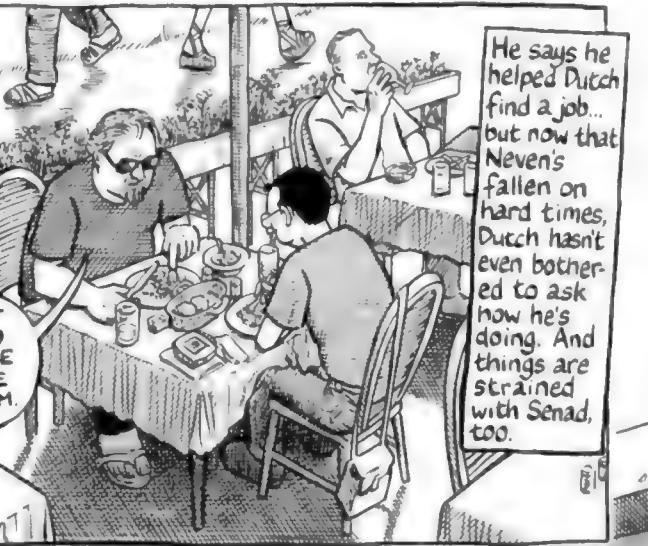
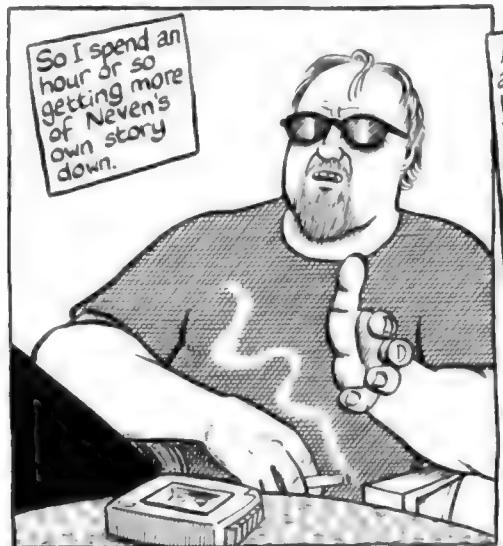


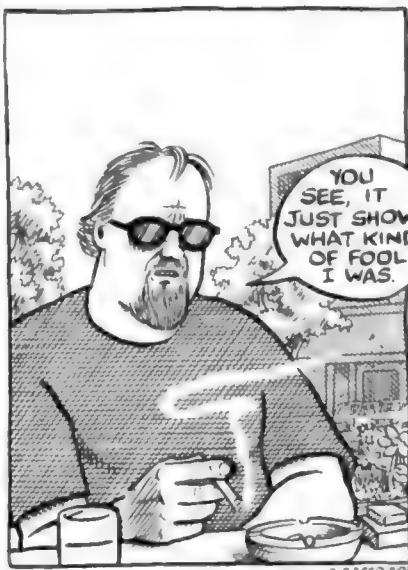
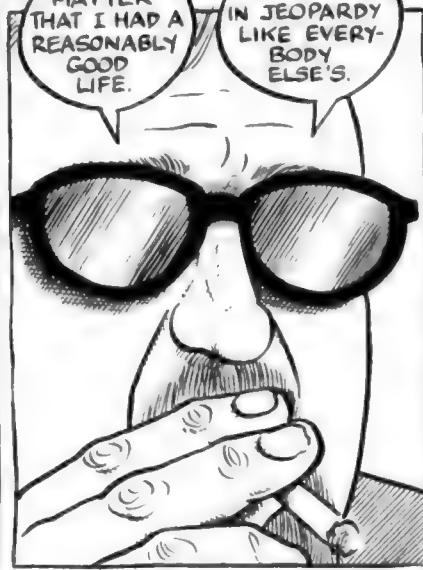
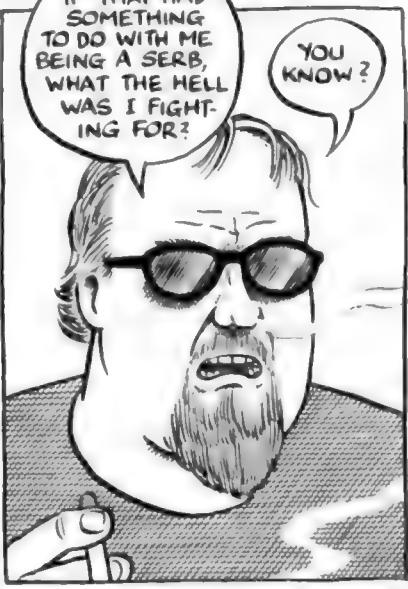
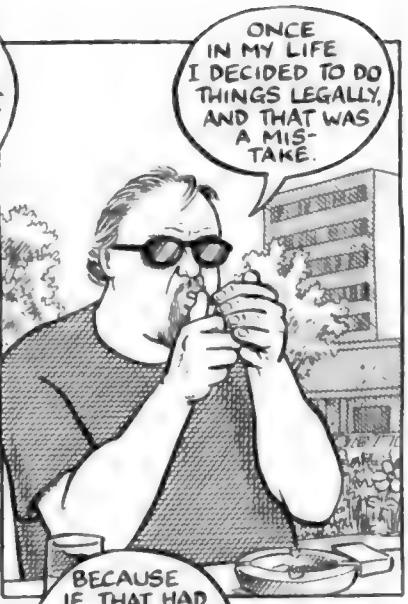
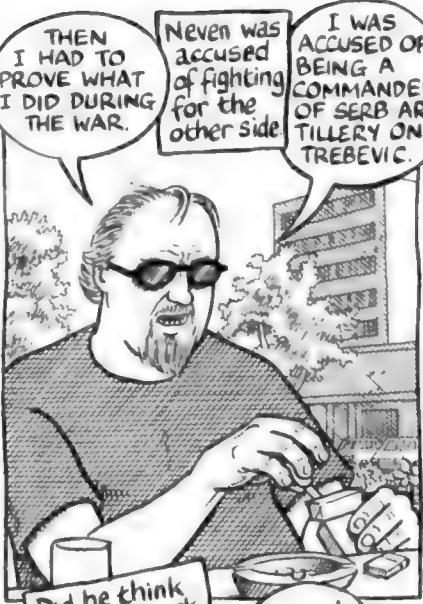
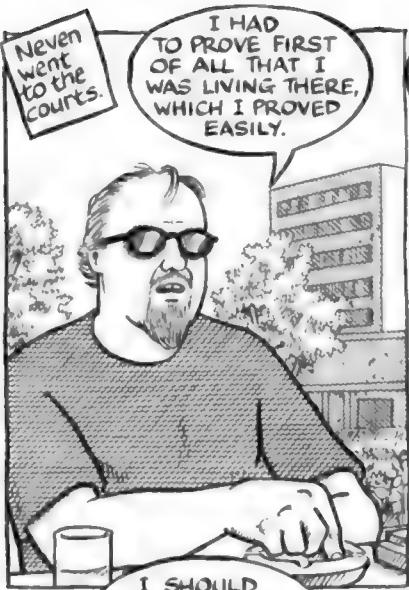


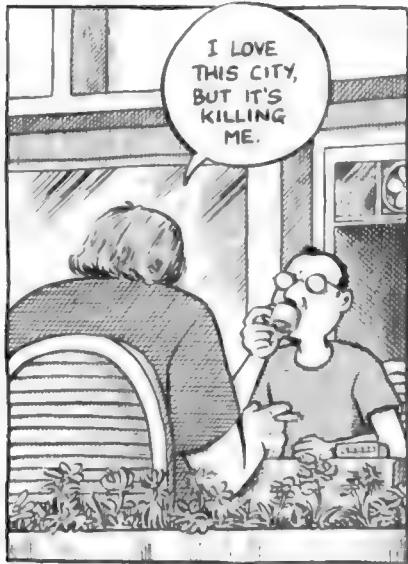




He promised to prepare some inside interviews for me, but he has prepared nothing. While we're drinking coffee, he pulls over a pal from the next table, who, needless to say, has little of interest to tell me.







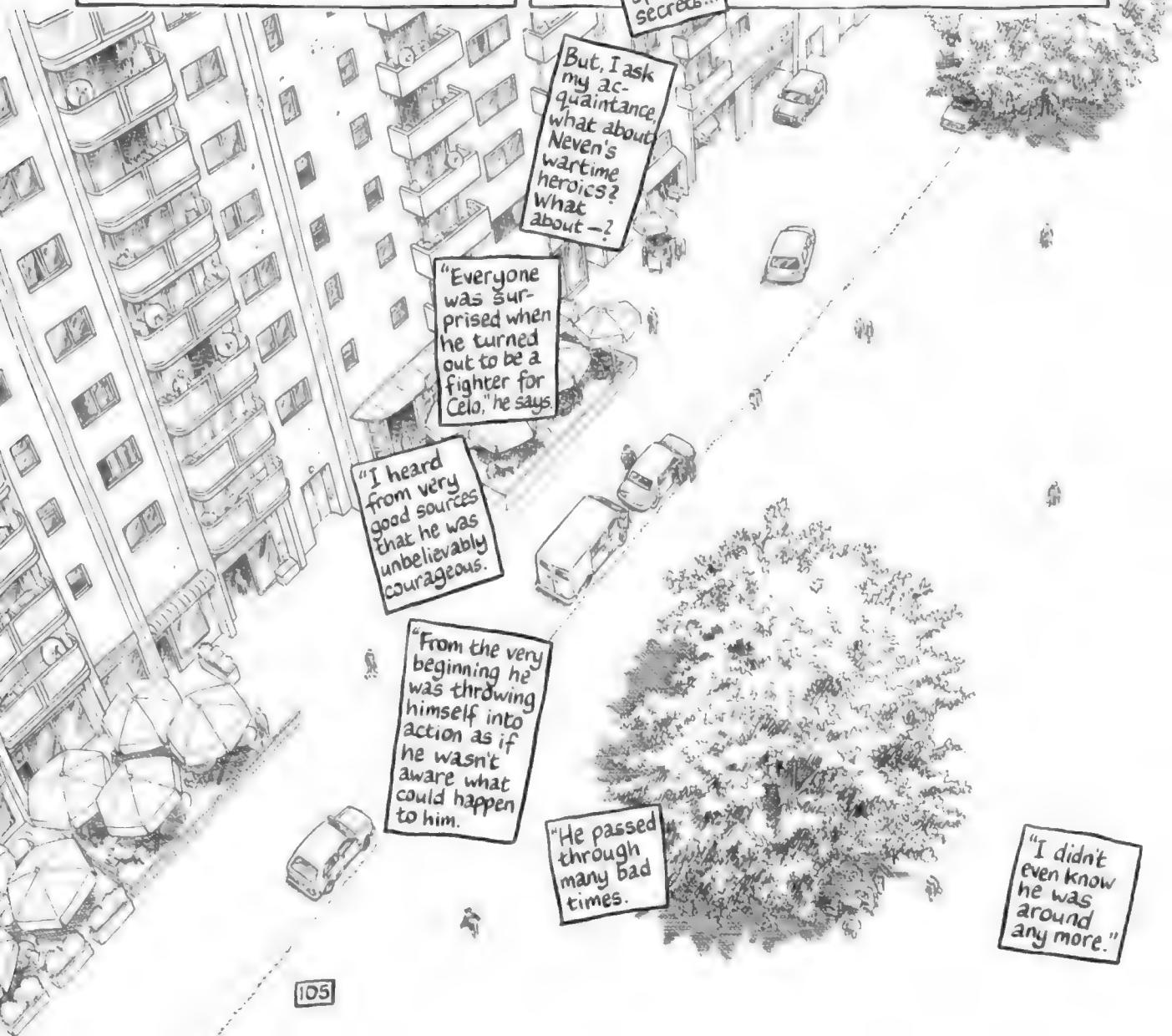
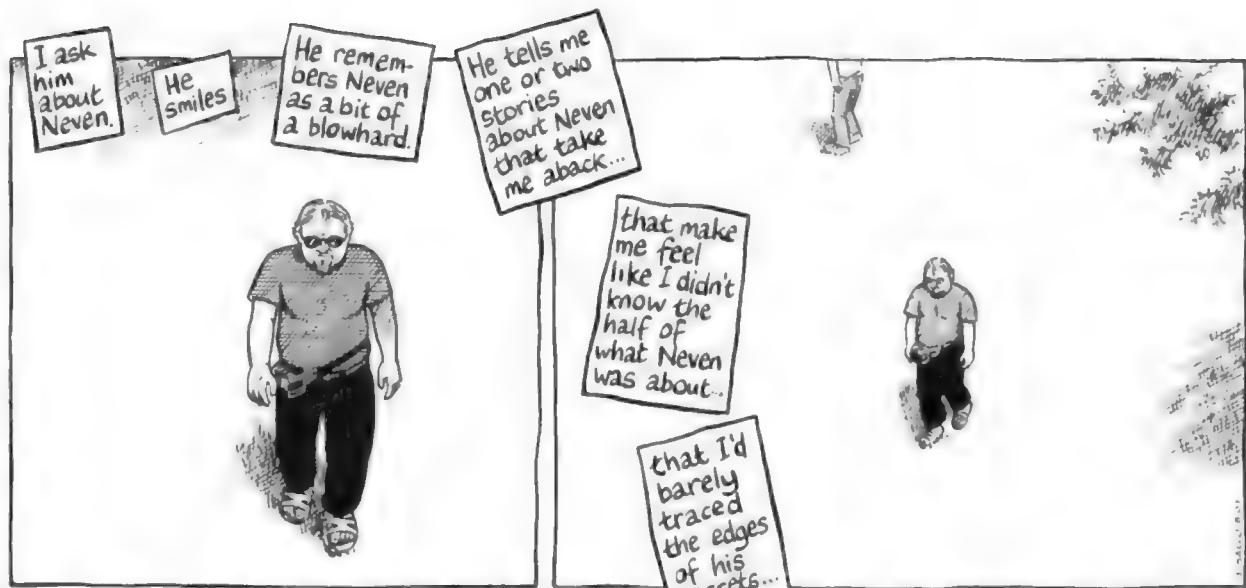
He's supposed to take me on Part Two of his guided tour, but I excuse him. Forget it, Neven.

Goodbye. Take care of yourself.

He walks back to where his pals are playing cards.



And I go see someone who knew Neven well, someone whose opinion I trust.



# LAST WORDS

## A NOTE ON THE TWO CELOS

As indicated in the book, two of Sarajevo's warlords – **Ismet Bajramovic** and **Ramiz Delalic** – were nicknamed Celo. To avoid too much confusion, I usually refer to Ismet Bajramovic (who is central to Neven's story) as Celo, and I usually refer to Ramiz Delalic by his last name. During the war, however, most Sarajevoans were apt to think of Delalic, who had a larger unit and was around longer, when someone mentioned the name Celo.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First off, great thanks to the **John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation** for providing a grant which got me back to Bosnia for additional research and bought me the time needed to produce this book.

In Sarajevo, special thanks to my old pal **Edin Culov** for helping out with translations at interviews and to **Lejla Efendic** for translating Bosnian-language articles into English. Thanks also to the staff at **Dani** magazine, particularly **Senad Pecanin** and **Vildana Selimbegovic**, who were always helpful to me during the war and upon my return visit. **Dani** was my primary source for the histories of the various warlords and most of the quotes attributed to them. Thanks to those few among Sarajevo's former police and army officials who took the time to answer my questions, namely **Munir Alibabic** and **Josan Divjak**. Thanks also to **Ferida Durakovic**, **Ivana Sekularac**, **Srdjan Vuletic**, and **Alma Mirvic**. In New York City, thanks to my other old pal **Soba** for all that last-minute help tracking down photos and information.

Thanks also to **Chris Oliveros**, Drawn & Quarterly publisher, for being patient while I stretched out the deadline for this book. He is a very easy man to work for.

Finally, the most thanks to **Neven**. Good luck to you always.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JOE WAS BORN IN MALTA IN 1960.** He moved around the world to Australia, before settling in Los Angeles in 1972. As a child he vividly remembers buying war comics and **Mad** magazine 1950s reprints. He studied at the University of Oregon and graduated with a degree in journalism in 1981. That same year he received his first rejection slip from **RAW** that noted his strip had "almost been published."

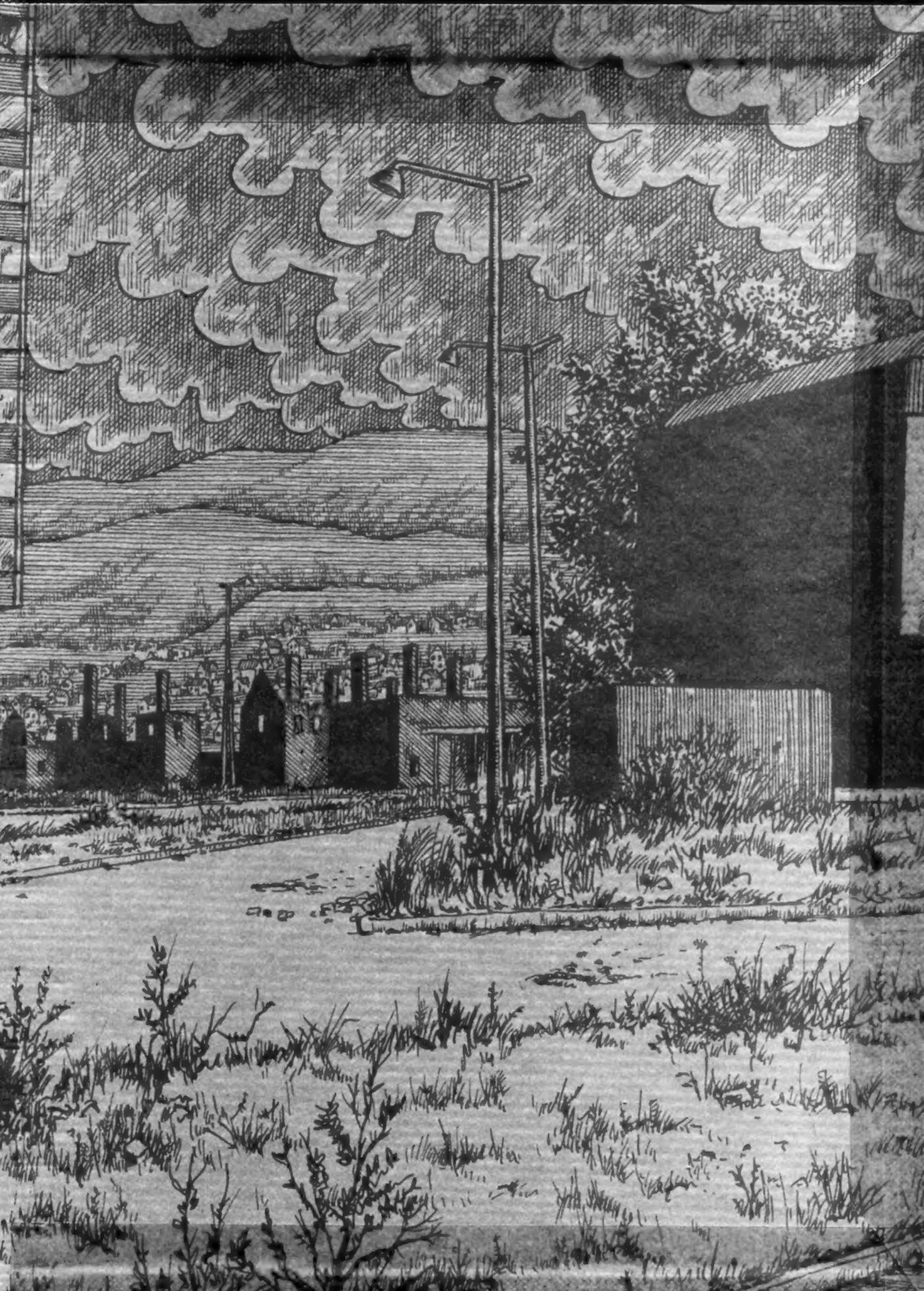
Joe continued to travel extensively in the 1980s, living in Europe and Malta. He worked as a cartoonist and editor for various presses, including **The Comics Journal**.

Joe traveled to the Middle East for the first time in 1991 and came away from Israel and the Occupied Territories with the material that would make up his groundbreaking comic book series **Palestine** (1995, Fantagraphics). Sacco was the recipient of the prestigious American Book Award in 1996 for **Palestine**.

In 1995, just prior to the end of the Bosnian War, Sacco traveled to Sarajevo and its surrounding areas. There he began his book **Safe Area Gorazde** (2000, Fantagraphics), a fierce condemnation of the political impotence and badly planned UN operations during the Bosnian conflict. He continues to travel to and write about the situation in Bosnia. He has an infrequent series called **Stories from Bosnia** with D&Q.

Joe's work has been exhibited at art galleries and universities around the world, and he has lectured on political conflict, journalism, and the art of comics.





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